

A PEOPLE  
PLANTED IN THE PROMISED LAND

*Jacob's blessings for his sons and for the tribes of Israel*

*A People Planted in the Promised Land by Hugo Bouter*  
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HUGO BOUTER

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CHAPTER TWO

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*"I have waited for Your salvation, O LORD!"*

*Genesis 49:18*



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## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

Jacob's last words to his sons in Genesis 49 are quite fascinating because of their far-reaching consequences. On his deathbed the patriarch prophesied what would befall the twelve tribes which would spring from his sons. These prophetic views describe the future of the tribes in the Promised Land. They would be planted there as God's vineyard in order to bear fruit to Him, but they did not come up to His expectations (Isa. 5; Ps. 80). Therefore they would be removed from the land and go into captivity. But there still remains a rest for the people of God, and so these blessings really extend to the distant future, right down to the time of the millennium, when Israel under the reign of Christ will be the centre of blessing for the whole earth. As Christians we also learn many practical lessons from Jacob's blessings, among other things in connection with fruit bearing, since these things were written also for our instruction (Romans 15:4).

In this new edition of "Jacob's last words" we have used the New King James Version, although we have sometimes quoted from the New American Standard Bible, because of its great accuracy in connection with the subject of our studies, Genesis chapter 49. We have also introduced a number of technical and textual changes. But as to the spelling, we have adhered to the standards of British English.

We repeat what was stated in the preface to the second edition: "We trust that all these changes will be helpful to the reader. But above all things we commend the book to the blessing of our dear Lord and Saviour, who alone is able to open the heart to respond to the riches of His Word".

London, Spring 2003



# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Jacob as a prophet

Genesis 49 relates to us the patriarch Jacob's will. It was very valuable not only for his immediate descendants, but also for his posterity in the distant future. Across the heads of his twelve sons, the dying Jacob addressed the twelve tribes that would spring from them and he spoke about all that would happen to them.

At the end of his life, Jacob the impostor, of whom we know so many bad things from earlier records in the book of Genesis, was lifted to great spiritual heights. As the Spirit of God endowed him with prophetic gifts, the honourable patriarch became a prophet who could view the distant future. His words related to that which would befall Israel "in the days to come" (v. 1 NASB).

He mentioned specific details that were not to be fulfilled until the period of the judges or even later. Some of them are still awaiting fulfilment.

### 1.2. Critical views refuted

For historical-critical researchers, this was one of the reasons to regard these blessings as much younger than they actually are and to see them as a collection of so-called "tribal sayings", comparable with Moses' last words or Deborah's song (Deut. 33 and Judg. 5). This would devalue them to certain sayings

and proverbs that were recited during public meetings for the instruction of the children of Israel.

It is obvious that such a vision ignores the inspiration of Scripture. Beyond that, it degrades the patriarchs to ordinary nomads, of whom one could not expect such a literary achievement – Genesis 49 is written in the form of a poem.

However, there are no sound reasons to maintain that these blessings should be attributed to someone else than Jacob. Genesis 49 is closely linked with the previous chapter, in which Jacob blessed Joseph's sons. We can also say that in blessing his sons, Jacob continued an existing tradition. When Isaac was old, he blessed Jacob and Esau and those blessings had a far-reaching import as well (Gen. 27). The same can be said of Noah's prophetic words to his sons (Gen. 9).

Another reason why these examples are important is that they refute yet another argument that some people have put forward to deny that Jacob spoke these words. For not all that Jacob spoke about his sons were blessings, whereas it says in verse 28 that he blessed each one of them with the appropriate blessing. Well, one might say, Reuben, Simeon and Levi did not get a blessing at all. Their blessings could be better characterized as curses. But this objection cannot stand in view of the fact that the same goes for Isaac's blessing of Esau and most certainly, for Noah's words to Canaan.

Beyond that, God is able to turn a curse into a blessing, as we see in the subsequent history of Levi (cf. Moses' blessing in Deut. 33). The effect of being shown one's faults, as is done in the first two blessings, can be very beneficial. So there is every reason to regard these words as *blessings*.

### 1.3. Prophetic blessings

Jacob's blessings for his sons are pointedly *prophetic*. He looks across the long period of Israel's slavery in Egypt, across the journey to the Promised Land and the entry into Canaan. His

words go even beyond the time of the judges or the period of the kings: they reach into the distant future.

Literally, it does not say “in the days to come” in verse 1 but, “in the last days”. This expression can be found fourteen times in the Old Testament (e.g., in Num. 24:14; Isa. 2:2; Dan. 2:28 and Hos. 3:5). Ultimately, it refers to the millennium in which all God’s promises to Israel will be fulfilled. For this reason alone, it is worthwhile indeed to study these prophecies of Jacob the patriarch.

## 2

# THE BLESSINGS OF THE SONS OF JACOB

## 2.1.

### REUBEN, UNSTABLE AS WATER

*“Reuben, you are my firstborn,  
My might and the beginning of my strength,  
The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power.  
Unstable as water, you shall not excel,  
Because you went up to your father’s bed;  
Then you defiled it – he went up to my couch”  
(vv. 3-4).*

#### 2.1.1. A serious message

After Jacob had twice summoned his sons to gather together and hear what their dying father had to say to them (vv. 1-2), it was quite natural that he should first address himself to his *eldest* son, Reuben. He addressed him directly, as he also did with Judah and Joseph. The other blessings are somewhat more aloof, in the third person.

When we take the time to reflect on Jacob’s words we shall see that he had a serious message for Reuben: ‘Reuben, you are the firstborn, the one of whom I had expected most of all and who had more responsibility than the others. But alas, you failed to meet my expectations and therefore you cannot retain the prominent place of the firstborn’.

The underlying idea of these words is that of guilt and punishment, sin and retribution. Reuben's failure is stated in verse 4. He had defiled his father's bed by committing adultery with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine (Gen. 35:22). As a consequence, he lost his place of preeminence; this was the penalty of his sin. The same pattern can be seen in the next blessing: Simeon's and Levi's guilt, too, resulted in a certain punishment (v. 7).

Such are the laws of God's *government*, although His *grace* can ease the penalty or even turn it into a blessing. In Reuben's case the sentence was commuted, whereas in Levi's case the curse was turned into a blessing later on (cf. Deut. 33:6, 8-11). In fact, Jacob's first three sons give us an impression of Israel's failure – and more in general, of the failure of the first man in his responsibility – as well as of God's dealings in relation to this.

However, in Reuben's case there is yet another aspect that made his failure all the more serious. Jacob did not begin by speaking about Reuben's sin, but about his *privileges* as the firstborn. In verse 3 these privileges are enlarged on, so that in the light of his excellency his guilt and punishment became even more poignant. Reuben's high position made his fall so much the greater.

### 2.1.2. Man soon forfeits his privileges

But this is what happened time and again throughout man's history. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were very privileged indeed, but after they had fallen into evil they were sent out from the garden and lost the privileges they had enjoyed there. Then we see how evil developed further along the line of Cain. Having murdered Abel, Cain turned away from the Lord, thus becoming the progenitor of a culture without God. This period of man's history, during which man walked by the light of his own conscience, ended in the judgment of the flood.

Then we find Noah being highly privileged as the ruler of

the new earth. However, he failed almost instantly because he could not discipline himself and fell into drunkenness. This dispensation, which was marked by the introduction of human government, ended in the judgment at the tower of Babel: the confusion of human tongues.

After that Abraham was called, in whom God's special promises for His covenant people took shape. But almost immediately upon his arrival in the land that God had shown to him he went on to Egypt, where he got into serious trouble. Egypt was also the country where the history of the patriarchs ended: it was the furnace of blazing fire used to purify their posterity before God eventually received them as His people. After Israel had been delivered from their slavery in that country and God had brought them to Himself "on eagles' wings", they failed in that they fell into idolatry at Mount Sinai.

In fact, Israel's history was one long succession of human failure met by divine grace. Immediately after Aaron and his sons had been consecrated to minister as priests, the priesthood failed because Nadab and Abihu approached God with strange fire. The Israelites despised the good land of Canaan and during the wilderness journey they continually rebelled against the Lord. After entering the land the people failed in that they only partially conquered the Promised Land. The period of the judges ended in an enormous chaos. The sons of Samuel, the last judge and the first prophet, did not walk in his ways. The kingship failed immediately with Saul, the king after the flesh. The period of Israel under the Law ended in the exile, first of the ten, later of the remaining two tribes. God then left His throne in Jerusalem, transferring power to the Babylonian empire.

This marked the beginning of the times of the Gentiles, which will last until the second coming of Christ. But even the first head of the Babylonian empire failed because he fell into idolatry and self-glorification. When Christ came to His own people He was rejected and they crucified Him. After His resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit descended to earth



and since then God has been gathering a bride – the Church – for His Son both from among the Jews and the Gentiles. But right at the beginning of the Church period, the wonderful picture that is painted of it in the Book of Acts is marred by the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. All these examples provide a clear illustration of the fact that man falls short of the place which is given to him by God and soon forfeits his privileges.

### 2.1.3. Reuben lost his birthright

The same thing happened to Reuben, who lost his birthright because he had failed. Now what were Reuben's privileges as the firstborn? First of all, Jacob called him his might and the beginning of his strength (v. 3a). He was the proof of Jacob's virile strength and the family heir who could ensure further offspring. In the Psalms we find a similar expression – "the first of all their strength" – indicating the firstborn of the Egyptians (Ps. 78:51; 105:36). In the law concerning the rights of the firstborn, Moses said that the firstborn of an Israelite would be entitled to a double portion of the inheritance, for he was "the beginning of his strength" (Deut. 21:17b).

In the second place Reuben, as the firstborn, had "the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power" (v. 3b). He had precedence over his brothers and he took the first place among them not only with regard to *property*, but also to *position*. He was entitled to a double portion of the inheritance, but also to a special position as a person in authority. This position of authority is expressed perhaps most clearly in Isaac's blessing of his firstborn son: "Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be master over your brethren, and let your mother's sons bow down to you" (Gen. 27:29).

In keeping with this, the meaning of the word *firstborn* later on developed into "someone of a certain rank, of a certain dignity". For example, we read of David, who was the eighth son of Jesse, that God promised to make him His firstborn, "the

highest of the kings of the earth" (Ps. 89:27). This holds true even more for the New Testament, where this word is used almost solely for Christ Himself to indicate His supreme position. In all things and in all relationships He has the first place, both with respect to His brethren and to the whole creation, even with respect to the dead (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5).

Alas, Reuben forfeited his birthright, so that he could *not* have preeminence. This is explained by Jacob in verse 4: "Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed". Reuben, having been carried away by his passions, had committed adultery with his father's concubine. The uncontrollableness of passion is aptly expressed in the picture of the unstable, swirling water. Reuben was unable to stop the flow of bitter water coming out of his heart and defiling him (cf. Mark 7:21-23; James 3:11). A person who has been renewed by Christ and has received the Holy Spirit, has a well of sweet and pure water inside himself, flowing with living water (John 4:14; 7:37-39).

Because of his sin Reuben lost his status as the one who had preeminence over his brothers. Therefore the tribe of Reuben never had a leading position among the Israelites. Reuben did not produce any important leaders, except in a negative sense at the time of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16:1). The Reubenites did not seek their inheritance in the Promised Land, but on the other side of the Jordan river (Num. 32; Josh. 22). Later on, when battles had to be waged, they kept themselves apart from their brothers (Judg. 5:15-16). Their area, to the east of the Jordan river, was very vulnerable to enemy attacks, particularly by the Moabites and the Aramaeans; they were among the first tribes to be carried away into the Assyrian exile.

Reuben had to relinquish the position of a leader, which could have been his, to Judah, the fourth son of Jacob. Simeon and Levi were passed over because of their violence against the inhabitants of Shechem. But of Judah, Jacob said that the

sceptre would not depart from him, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet (v. 10 NASB). Judah was to be the royal tribe and "from him came a ruler" (1 Chr. 5:2). Besides, it would appear from First Chronicles 5 that the privileges of the firstborn were split. Although *Judah* received the leading position, the special blessing of the firstborn – the double portion of the inheritance – went to *Joseph*. This is also clearly confirmed in Genesis 49. The richest blessings were reserved for Joseph, Rachel's firstborn son (vv. 22-26).

But we should not forget to note the work of God's grace as manifested in the history of the tribe of Reuben. On the one hand there is this negative subject of punishment, which soon made Reuben lose his significance. But on the other hand there is the positive theme of God's grace, which preserved this tribe from becoming extinct. This is especially highlighted in Moses' blessing: "Let Reuben live and not die, nor let his men be few" (Deut. 33:6). Here Moses pleaded, as it were, for grace for Reuben, so that in spite of being small and insignificant, the tribe might survive. In its spiritual application this shows the need for the quickening work of God's grace, to enable a person to stand before God and be blessed by Him. Another remarkable thing is that in Revelation 7 the tribe of Reuben is represented among those of Israel who will be sealed; it is mentioned in the second place, after Judah.

#### 2.1.4. The message for Israel and the Church

Jacob's firstborn son had disappointed him. That which should have been holy to Reuben (cf. Lev. 18:8), he had defiled. Therefore he had to be put aside as the firstborn. Through his unstable act of immorality he had forfeited both the double portion of his father's inheritance and his position as firstborn among his brothers.

But the same principle goes for the *nation* of Israel as a whole, being God's firstborn son (Ex. 4:22-23). God called him

out of Egypt, delivered him and took care of him as the special object of His love (Hos. 11:1-4). But Israel repeatedly turned away from Him, behaving in a way which was totally unfitting for a firstborn son. For that reason God has put His people aside, their name now being Lo-ammi, that is "Not-My-People" (Hos. 1:9). But it is good to know that God will reverse this situation in the last days.

We can apply these things also to ourselves as Christians, God's people in the present time. Our history has not been any better than Israel's, neither did we respond fully to our high calling. The Israelites were the "sons" of the Lord (Deut. 14:1-2 JND), but believers now form the "Church of the firstborn" (Heb. 12:23). Christ has preeminence among them, for He is "the Firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29). Although the New Testament reserves this title for Him in particular, the saints are linked with Him. His dignity is reflected in us. Through Him we obtained the position of children and sons of God. These blessings were in fact unknown until God's Son had come in the flesh and the Spirit of God's Son had been sent into our hearts (Gal. 4:4,6).

While Israel knew these relationships in a collective and outward sense, their full meaning was revealed only after Jesus' death on the cross. We are *children of God* because we are born of Him and as such we can show to the world Who is our Father. We are also *sons of God* according to God's eternal purpose, through Christ's work of salvation (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 1:5-7). As such God has destined us for Himself, in order that we might serve and honour Him as sons in whom He delights (cf. Prov. 3:12). Do we both personally and collectively respond to these high privileges? Should we not acknowledge that there are many things contrary to this high calling?

When looking back upon the history of the Church, we have to admit that it often acted in disrespect rather than in respect for God and that it has fallen short of God's expectations of His own. The Church has been a holy people just as little as Israel. It belonged exclusively to Him as His own

people, but it mingled with the world and was found guilty of idolatry (cf. Rev. 2 and 3). From the beginning of its existence, the mystery of lawlessness has been at work (2 Thess. 2:7). It has left its first love and has fallen from the high position it occupied in God's thoughts (Rev. 2:4-5). Therefore Christendom will be put aside as God's witness on earth, just as Reuben could not retain the position of a firstborn. However, this does not mean that God's plans and purposes will be undone because of man's failure. For we know that all true Christians will partake in Christ's glory as the Prince of Peace, when God again brings His Firstborn into the world (cf. Gen 49:10). That which man has spoiled, Christ will restore.

Finally, a few words about the name Reuben (meaning "see, a son"). Undoubtedly this name expressed the grateful surprise that filled Leah after the birth of her firstborn. Like Eve, she might have thought that with the help of the Lord she had got a reliable manchild (Gen. 4:1; 29:32). Both mothers were disappointed in their sons and both had to learn that one cannot expect anything good from the natural man. But once we have been renewed by Christ and have become sons of God, we can be truly happy. The blessing of sonship is a precious thing and it should lead us to praise the One whom we now call upon as "Abba, Father".

Leah exclaimed, "See, a son". We may exclaim, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1). So let us behave as worthy children and sons in order that the image of God's Son will be seen in us.

## 2.2.

### SIMEON AND LEVI, COMPANIONS IN CRUELTY

*“Simeon and Levi are brothers;  
Instruments of cruelty are in their habitation.  
Let not my soul enter their council;  
Let not my honour be united to their assembly;  
For in their anger they slew a man (or, men),  
And in their self-will they hamstrung an ox (or, oxen).  
Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce;  
And their wrath, for it is cruel!  
I will divide them in Jacob  
And scatter them in Israel”  
(vv. 5-7).*

#### 2.2.1. Brothers in evil

From a structural point of view, Jacob’s second blessing is quite similar to the first: again, we recognize the theme of guilt and punishment, sin and retribution. While Reuben had not controlled his desire and had committed adultery with Bilhah, Simeon and Levi had perpetrated violence against the inhabitants of Shechem. So again Jacob alluded to an incident that had taken place earlier in his life.

This incident is recorded in detail in Genesis 34. The son of the prince of Shechem had defiled Dinah, Jacob’s daughter. Desiring to marry her, he suggested that the sons of Jacob intermarry with the Shechemites. But they deceived him, telling him that this was impossible, unless the men of Shechem be

circumcised. The men of Shechem were indeed circumcised and while they were seriously weakened as a result of this, Simeon and Levi unexpectedly assaulted and killed them. The sons of Jacob then looted the city and returned home with their considerable booty. The chapter ends with Jacob protesting against these actions and telling Simeon and Levi that they had brought trouble on him. But they justified themselves, stating, "Should he treat our sister like a harlot?" (34:31).

In Genesis 49 Jacob referred to this and once again clearly dissociated himself from the violence of his two sons. They were brothers in evil, partners in crime (v. 5). Being the second and third sons respectively of Leah, Simeon and Levi were brothers in the literal sense of the word. But this was not what Jacob had in mind. His point was that they had displayed the same evil features and had been one in their way of acting. Therefore he addressed them *together* in his last words. In fact, he did not speak to them directly: he used the third person. So he said something about them in front of all his sons. They all could learn from it.

While each of the others was blessed with the blessing appropriate to him (v. 28), Simeon and Levi were lumped together. They were brothers, regrettably not in doing good, but in doing evil. Psalm 133 speaks about the blessing of brotherly fellowship in a positive sense: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (v. 1). In the case of Simeon and Levi, however, this fellowship had degenerated into a terrible plot that they had obviously hatched against the inhabitants of Shechem. In verse 6 Jacob spoke about "their council" and "their assembly", from which he dissociated himself. He did not want to have anything to do with such a fellowship in doing evil.

So the attack on the citizens of Shechem was a premeditated assault. Simeon and Levi knew perfectly well what they were doing. Their revenge on the Shechemites was a well-prepared action and the means that were used by them were "instruments of cruelty", or "implements of violence" (v. 5 NASB).

Whatever these weapons might have been (some think of swords, others of pickaxes), they were weapons of darkness and “instruments of unrighteousness”. Christians are exhorted to cast off the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light (cf. Rom. 6:13; 13:12). The diligence of Jacob’s sons could have been better used. But how about us? Do we use “the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left” (2 Cor. 6:7)? Are the weapons of our warfare “not carnal, but mighty in God” (2 Cor. 10:4)?

### 2.2.2. Separation from evil

Whereas *evil desire* was Reuben’s sin, Simeon and Levi made use of instruments of cruelty, implements of *violence*. From the very beginning of man’s history these have been the two fundamental evils: inner corruption (showing itself in lust and deceit), but also outward violence. Eve sinned in that she *desired* to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Cain committed *violence*, thus becoming the first murderer.

Very often these fundamental evils go together, as we find them in the sons of Jacob. First they spoke deceitfully with the Shechemites as they were plotting against them, then their anger forced its way out in merciless violence. And both humans and animals had to pay for it, “because in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they lamed oxen” (v. 6 NASB). The latter action is not mentioned in Genesis 34, which tells us only that they took all their flocks. But the one does not exclude the other. In reprisals like these anything can happen and this is exactly what Jacob denounced.

So Jacob openly condemned the evil of his sons. Particularly for a father, this is not easy! But the patriarch did not take his children under his protection, neither did he try to tone down their guilt. Rather than trying to call evil good (cf. Isa. 5:20), he called it by its real name. Here we also see the need to be separated from evil: “Let not my soul enter their council; let not



my honour be united to their assembly" (v. 6a). The righteous do not walk in the counsel of the ungodly and light has no fellowship with darkness. The Scriptures illustrate this with many examples (cf. Num. 16:23-27; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; 2 Tim. 2:19-22; Rev. 18:4). Jacob spoke about his soul and his spirit – literally his *honour*, his glory. He wanted to protect himself from being defiled by evil, which dishonours a man and puts him to shame.

Jacob's judgment was far-reaching (v. 7). This verse contains a curse and a reprisal. While Simeon and Levi themselves were not subjected to the curse, their anger and wrath *were*: "Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel!" (v. 7a). Unlike Genesis 3:14, where the serpent is cursed, and Judges 5:23, where the inhabitants of Meroz are cursed, Jacob's curse only related to the *manifestations* of evil that he had found in Simeon and Levi. This is also the way in which God deals with His children, for He loves us and wants to bless us, but the evil in us He must judge.

Although Jacob's sons had tried to make their actions appear as a defence of their sister's honour (cf. Gen. 34:31), Jacob now revealed their real motives. It was their anger and self-will which had brought them that far (v. 6b), and pure revengefulness had incited them to commit gross violence. They had not been driven by a holy anger at all, but by a sinful, evil anger. Holy anger is quite permissible and can be perfectly good, but it can easily degenerate into a manifestation of the flesh. Paul warns against this when he says: "Be angry, and *do not sin*; do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil" (Eph. 4:26-27).

### 2.2.3. I will scatter them

The curse is then followed by a reprisal: "I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel" (v. 7b). We have already noted that Jacob's judgment was far-reaching indeed. It was a

sentence with enduring consequences. The results of the evil that Simeon and Levi had committed were not limited to themselves but had an impact on their offspring. We who live in the day of grace are sometimes inclined to forget that God's government is a serious thing, but we should remember that God cannot be mocked. As it is written, "For whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7). "For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29).

Of course, everybody has to pay for his own sins in the first place and has to bear the consequences of his own trespasses. The believer will not come into eternal judgment because Christ died in his stead (John 5:24), but as long as he is on earth he has to do with God's righteous ways. God's government is a *righteous* one, as is obvious in all dispensations.

But in His grace, God often moderates the consequences of our going astray. We shall also see this in Simeon and Levi's case. But it is beyond any doubt that He reigns and sometimes He will visit the iniquity of parents on their children (Ex. 20:5). As heads of their families, Simeon and Levi had failed and their descendants were to suffer the effects of this. Simeon and Levi had been brothers in evil; they had conspired against the citizens of Shechem. Now the punishment was that this union of unrighteousness was put to an end by dispersing and scattering them in Israel. This judgment bears much resemblance to the judgment of the confusion of tongues at the time of the tower of Babel. When men combined their forces to commit evil, God undid their ambitions by dispersing and scattering the sons of men over the face of all the earth (Gen. 11:1-9).

It is very remarkable that Jacob regarded *himself* as the one who would carry out this judgment: "I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel". This clearly proves that he was prophesying here. God Himself spoke through Jacob's mouth, foretelling the future of the two tribes of Simeon and Levi. The course of history is in His hands and He can declare the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10). Then too, we should not forget that as the head of his family, Jacob had been in-

vested with authority by God. As a representative and an interpreter of God's rights, he was fully entitled to speak to his sons in this way.

Without a doubt this prophecy was fulfilled in the history of these two tribes. Simeon and Levi were indeed scattered in Israel. But there was a big difference between them. As an independent tribe, Simeon ceased almost totally to exist. But Levi's curse was changed into a blessing, because he remained faithful to the LORD when Israel sinned in making the golden calf (Ex. 35:25-29; Deut. 33:8-11). Levi's dispersion remained in force, but since the Levites lived among the other tribes they were able to teach God's laws all over the country. Thus they occupied a very privileged place among their brethren.

Although originally the Simeonites were very numerous, their numbers had decreased dramatically by the end of the journey through the wilderness. This becomes apparent if one compares the censuses of Numbers 1 and 26. Some expositors suggest that this great reduction was due to the men of Simeon being deeply involved in the idolatry of Baal of Peor. The Israelite who was killed by Phinehas was a Simeonite. Also, a plague killed twenty-four thousand Israelites – probably many of them from the tribe of Simeon – on the very same day (Num. 25:6-18).

In the blessing of Moses, Simeon is not even mentioned separately. When the land of Canaan was divided in the days of Joshua, this tribe did not get a separate inheritance, but a number of cities in the midst of the portion of the sons of Judah (Josh. 19:1-9). Simeon's destiny was closely linked with that of Judah. We see how they fought together against the Canaanites to conquer the territory allotted to them (Judg. 1:3,17).

Since the Simeonites lived within the territory of Judah ("scattered" among them), they were largely absorbed by this tribe. When David became king they lost their own cities (1 Chr. 4:31). Later on a number of Simeonites emigrated to areas outside the Promised Land, to the South and Mount Seir (1 Chr. 4:34-43). In the kingdom of the ten tribes there must have been

Simeonites too (2 Chr. 15:9; 34:6-7). Thus Jacob's word was fulfilled and Simeon was dispersed and scattered in Israel.

#### 2.2.4. Levi set apart to the LORD

The history of Levi is much better known. Levi's descendants were also scattered among the other tribes of Israel. However, at the beginning of the wilderness journey their destiny showed a turn for the better and as a result of this their history was different from that of the Simeonites. This turn for the better is found in Exodus 32, where, in response to Moses' call, the Levites dedicated themselves to the Lord and punished the sinful people.

At first sight this would seem to be a similar action to the one Levi took against the inhabitants of Shechem. At Mount Sinai, as many as three thousand people were killed by the Levites. But this action was no mere human revenge as was the carnage in Shechem. This was God's judgment executed by them in order to curb the idolatry and lawlessness of the Israelites.

This proof of their dedication to the Lord was then rewarded. The Levites were given the special status of servants of the Lord and of the sanctuary. They were entrusted with the service in the tabernacle and were allowed to camp around the dwelling place of God. In this way the Levites became the assistants of the priests, the sons of Aaron who also belonged to the tribe of Levi and had been set apart for the service of the Lord before that (Ex. 28:1).

The election and the consecration of the Levites are described in the early chapters of the Book of Numbers. There we find the next important issue in connection with our subject: the Levites were given to the Lord instead of all the firstborn of the Israelites (Num. 3:11-13, 40-45; cf. Ex. 13:1-2). So in a sense, the Levites received the place and the status of the *firstborn*! As we have seen before, the birthright had been taken away from

Reuben and given to Judah and Joseph respectively. However, as the Levites were set apart for the Lord in a special way, they also shared in the blessing of the firstborn. For the Lord took pleasure in them and He was their inheritance (Deut. 10:8-9).

In Deuteronomy 10 the election of the Levites is clearly linked with Israel's sojourn at Mount Sinai and their sin with the golden calf. They answered Moses' call to choose for the Lord and therefore Moses had nothing but praise for them in his blessing: "Let Your Thummim and Your Urim be with Your holy one, whom You tested at Massah, and with whom You contended at the waters of Meribah, who says of his father and mother, 'I have not seen them'; nor did he acknowledge his brothers, or know his own children; for they have observed Your word and kept Your covenant. They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, and a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar" (Deut. 33:8-10).

This is again a reference to what had happened at Mount Sinai. In the same way as Levi stood up for the rights of God there, he was henceforth to maintain the Word and the Law of God in Israel. Here we also see the twofold character of the service of the Levites, both Godward and manward. Before *men* they maintained God's laws and rights, but before *God* they appeared with incense and burnt offerings.

Moses' blessing of Levi is very different from Jacob's blessing. Yet the prophecy of Jacob was completely fulfilled, for the tribe of Levi did not get a separate inheritance in the land of Canaan. They were scattered among all the tribes of Israel. The Lord Himself was their inheritance, and they received only a few cities from each tribe to live in (Josh. 21). They were indeed dispersed in Israel, but the curse was changed into a blessing in that as servants of the Lord, the Levites enjoyed a privileged position everywhere in the land.

Simeon (meaning "heard" or "hearing") and Levi (meaning "joined" or "attached") did not live up to their names, as they acted in independence of God and were allies in evil. But at Mount Sinai Levi joined himself to the Lord, which made the

history of this tribe take a much better course than that of the Simeonites. This same principle holds true for us: he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him and will find His favour (1 Cor. 6:17).

But it is not always like that in our lives. Neither is the history of the Church, generally speaking, marked by dedication to the Lord. Very often it showed attachment to the world and disobeyed the voice of God, the voice of the Spirit and the Word. Like Simeon and Levi, Christendom has joined forces for ill and has committed violence on the earth. It has become a ruling power, a great city that is guilty of the blood of prophets and saints (Rev. 18:24). But God will destroy her aims and put an end to the accumulated unrighteousness of Babylon the Great (Rev. 17 and 18).

As Reuben typically shows the first failure of the Church and its departure from its original state, Simeon and Levi show the full measure of evil as well as the ensuing punishment. May God give us grace to *hear* what the Spirit says to the churches and not be *attached* to the world. Let us cling to the Word and the Name of Christ (cf. Rev. 2 and 3). Then we shall be true "Simeonites" and "Levites".

Until now, Jacob's last words were not very encouraging. In the blessings of his first three sons he spoke about sad things that had happened in his family. Therefore Reuben, Simeon and Levi show us man's *failure* in his responsibility – both of man in general and of Israel and the Church in particular. Corruption and violence have always been the clear proofs of human failure. In these verses we learn the painful lesson that "the spiritual is not first, but the natural" (1 Cor. 15:46). How good it is then that we can look away from the first man and look upon Christ, the second Man from heaven. He bore the consequences of our fall, and by His death and resurrection He became the Head of a newborn people. Judah is a striking type of Him and so He is the central figure of Jacob's next blessing.

### 2.3.

## JUDAH, A LION'S WHELP

*"Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise;  
Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;  
Your father's children shall bow down to you.*

*Judah is a lion's whelp;  
From the prey, my son, you have gone up.  
He bows down, he lies down as a lion;  
And as a lion, who shall rouse him?*

*The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,  
Nor a lawgiver (or, the ruler's staff) from between his feet,  
Until Shiloh comes;  
And to Him shall be the obedience of the people (or, the peoples).*

*Binding his donkey to the vine,  
And his donkey's colt to the choice vine,  
He washed his garments in wine,  
And his clothes in the blood of grapes.  
His eyes are darker than wine,  
And his teeth whiter than milk"  
(vv. 8-12).*

#### 2.3.1. The first introduction of the Messiah

Here we have the first climax in the blessings of Jacob and the first introduction of the Messiah. This blessing contrasts sharply with the previous ones. After all the negative things

that the patriarch had to say about his three eldest sons he changed his tune totally when it was Judah's turn to be blessed. No words of criticism but only laudable things are heard in connection with him.

Yet the enthusiasm with which Jacob spoke about Judah can only be understood properly if, in Judah, we see the One who was greater than he. Although the history of Joseph gives a rather favourable picture of Judah as a leader, we do have the story about Judah and Tamar in the Bible, which shows that Judah himself was not flawless either. But it becomes a different matter if we regard him as a type of the Messiah, the Prince who was to come forth out of Judah. This great Ruler deserves all our praises indeed.

The prophetic blessings of Jacob contain in fact a brief outline of the whole history of mankind. After all the failures of the first man, as described in the sins of Reuben, Simeon and Levi, our eyes are turned to Christ, the second Man from heaven. In Him, God in His grace intervened when natural man's utter corruption – both under the Law and without the Law – had been brought to light. But Christ the Lord, the great Judah and the true Shiloh, was rejected by Jews and Gentiles alike, which marked yet another low point in man's history. Here only the salvation of the Lord could bring help (v. 18). This will come about fully when Christ will reappear at the end of the age.

That is the second climax, which is reached at the end of Genesis 49 with Joseph and Benjamin, who are both types of Christ in the coming Kingdom of peace. In the light of this we understand why Jacob paid so much attention to both Judah and Joseph. He was a ready instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit to give us an impression of the greatness of Christ, both in His first coming to this earth and in His coming again.

In length, the blessing of Judah is only matched and even surpassed by that of Joseph (vv. 22-26). Both blessings carry a wealth of thoughts. As we have already seen, Judah was given the leadership – the privileged position of the firstborn –



because the first three sons of Jacob had failed. This is a key to a good understanding of these verses. But Joseph received the *wealth* of the firstborn, the double portion of the inheritance (cf. Deut. 21:15-17; 1 Chr. 5:1-2). This is why Jacob dwelled on Judah and Joseph. The Holy Spirit used it to paint a picture of the glory of Christ, the Firstborn among many brethren and even of all creation (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15).

In the blessing of Moses, emphasis is laid on Levi and Joseph rather than on Judah and Joseph. Moses mentions Judah with just one verse (Deut. 33:7), which contains a plea for Judah's restoration, his return from exile (cf. Deut. 30:1-10), and for strength in the battle with enemies. The central theme in Deuteronomy is the possession of the Promised Land, because Israel was about to enter into Canaan. Therefore the spiritual leadership of the priests and the Levites is stressed above all, being a prerequisite for granting the people possession of the Promised Land. In this passage Moses also pays much attention to Joseph, as he is granted the richest blessings of the land. Genesis 49 deals more with the prophetic history of Jacob's descendants and with the revelation of God's salvation through the coming Messiah.

### 2.3.2. Your brothers shall praise you

The blessing of Judah can be divided into four parts. First we see Judah as the one who is honoured by his brothers and feared by his enemies (v. 8). By way of illustration, we then hear about the overcoming power of the lion, the king of the animals (v. 9). Then Judah's lasting reign is foretold, as well as the coming of Shiloh, the Prince of Peace to whom even the nations would submit (v. 10). Finally, Judah's future prosperity is described. Perhaps the central figure of these verses is again the Messiah, who used a donkey to ride into Jerusalem (vv. 11-12; cf. Zech. 9:9).

Jacob began with a pun on the name of Judah, which means

“praise”. He was to be the object of his brothers’ praise: “Judah, your brothers shall praise you” (v. 8a NASB). In Hebrew, strong emphasis is laid on the personal pronoun “you”. In the NKJV this is rendered: “*You are he* whom your brothers shall praise”. In this way Jacob emphasized the contrast with his first three sons. At last he could address a son in whom he was well pleased.

Judah was the one who acquired the birthright that Reuben had forfeited – and that Simeon and Levi had also been unable to claim. Judah was to take the first place among his brothers, who would praise him and even bow down before him (v. 8c). The same feature is found in the dreams of Joseph, who is also a type of the Messiah. This was literally fulfilled when his brothers came to Egypt and bowed down to him.

Both Judah and Joseph are types of Christ who, after His finished work, called His own His *brethren* and declared the name of the Father to them (John 20:17). Christ is the Firstborn among many brethren; and in their midst He is the One who sings the Father’s praises (Ps. 22:22; Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:12). He is the true Judah, the One who truly praises God and it is with Him that we can praise the Father. And in doing so, we also bow down to Him who has revealed the Father to us. So we honour the Son as we honour the Father. We praise both God and the Lamb, who is the Lion of the tribe of Judah (v. 9; Rev. 5:5).

Verse 8 might give us the clue as to why Judah’s brothers praise him. He is the hero who triumphs over his enemies: “Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies”. This is not the static picture of a victor who puts his foot on the neck of his enemies (Josh. 10:24; Ps. 110:1), but rather the dynamic picture of somebody in hot pursuit grabbing his fleeing adversary by the neck.

In the history of Israel these words were fulfilled in the time of king David, the famous descendant of the house of Judah (cf. 2 Sam. 22:41, where it says that God had also given him the necks of his enemies). Saul had slain his thousands, but David

his ten thousands. For that reason he was honoured and as time went by all the tribes of Israel recognized his kingship.

Unlike Isaac, Jacob did not use the expression "your *mother's* sons" (Gen. 27:29), but "your *father's* children" (Gen. 49:8c). This included all the tribes of Israel, not only those who had come forth out of Leah. In the same way as David was recognized everywhere by his brothers because of his great exploits, Christ now receives glory and honour from the redeemed because of His victories. On Calvary's cross He overcame Satan, sin and death. He beat the devil with his own sword, viz. the power of death (cf. 1 Sam. 17; Heb. 2:14). Therefore we praise His name and bow down to Him in adoration. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Ruler of the universe and worthy of universal praise.

This takes us to verse 9, where Judah is likened to both a lion's whelp and a full-grown lion. While the young lion is a symbol of swiftness, the lying down of the full-grown animal shows the awe it inspires. After devouring its prey, it has climbed up to its hiding-place in the mountains and who shall rouse it there? In the blessing of Moses, the tribe of Dan is spoken of as a swift lion's whelp and the tribe of Gad is likened to a tearing lion (Deut. 33:20-22).

Here in Genesis 49 we find more comparisons with animals: Issachar (a donkey), Dan (a serpent), Naphtali (a deer), and Benjamin (a wolf). There is virtually no reason to ascribe any mythical meaning to this, as these animals are only used to illustrate certain characteristics of Jacob's sons. The tribe of Judah always seems to have had a lion as its emblem and even in our Western countries the lion is a very common heraldic figure. No other picture could express so clearly that Judah was to possess a special victorious power. Balaam in his blessings used a similar wording to describe the whole nation of Israel (Num. 23:24; 24:9).

### 2.3.3. Until Shiloh comes

By the favourable words of verses 8 and 9, feelings of amazement and expectation are raised. Judah, being a model of courage and strength, was acknowledged by friend and foe alike. What more could be said of him? The prophecy reaches a special climax in verse 10, one of the best known and at the same time most difficult verses of the Old Testament. Judah was to retain his supremacy until the coming of Shiloh, who would possess even greater authority and subdue the nations. This announcement is then followed by a depiction of the time of blessing that would be the result of Shiloh's coming (vv. 11-12).

Judah's reign was not to be temporary but abiding: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet" (v. 10a NASB). There is no metaphorical language here like in verse 9, where we saw Judah as a triumphant lion. Here he is depicted as an oriental king who is holding his long staff – the sign of his dignity – between his feet when seated on his throne. The ruler's staff is not just a symbol of royal dignity; it can also denote lower authority (Num. 21:18; Judg. 5:14).

Some translations (KJV, NKJV) have the word "lawgiver" for "ruler's staff", which in itself is not wrong, but from the context it is obvious that a *thing in the hands of the ruler* is meant here (cf. Ps. 60:7 NASB).

So we see that Judah should have a leading role and be preeminent over the other tribes. In the wilderness journey he already had the first place among the tribes of Israel and this never changed – until the division of the kingdom. Of course, the climax of Judah's general supremacy was the kingship of David, but this was not of a permanent character. First it was reduced to the kingdom of the two tribes and then Judah lost it in the Babylonian exile. But even after the exile, Judah occupied a leading position, so that the remaining Israelites who returned to the Promised Land were regarded as Judeans,

Jews, and merged into this tribe. So in these verses Jacob does not only prophesy about Judah's kingship but also, in more general terms, about the *leadership* that was to be his permanent portion.

These words serve as a preparation for the following climax: "Until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people (or, peoples)" (v. 10b). Judah was to have dominion, but after the coming of Shiloh it would extend even to the nations.

The word "Shiloh" has caused quite some problems for interpreters, since this is the only Scripture where it is found in this specific form. Shiloh as the name of a town that frequently occurs in the historical books, is spelled somewhat differently in Hebrew. The words "until Shiloh comes" have been rendered in many varying ways, as the following list illustrates:

- "until he (i.e., Judah) comes to Shiloh";
- "until he comes to a place of rest";
- "until they (i.e., the tribes) come to Shiloh";
- "until rest will come";
- "until a present for him comes";
- "until he comes to his own";
- "until He comes whose right it is" (cf. Ezek. 21:27);
- "until his son comes";
- "until the hero comes";
- "until the ruler comes".

We see that the word "Shiloh" is understood to be the name of a place, a present or a person. Yet most Bible translators and expositors hold that this is a Messianic prophecy.

There is too much evidence against regarding Shiloh as the name of a town in this verse. And it is more than just an indication of a certain thing or a state of happiness. It is one of the names of the Messiah, who was to spring from Judah and who would carry the glory of Judah's dominion to un-

precedented heights\*.

It is not objectionable at all to regard the coming of David and particularly that of Solomon as a preliminary fulfilment of this prophecy. The words Shiloh and Solomon are obviously related and refer to the peace and quiet that marked Israel in the days of Solomon (1 Chr. 22:9). He consolidated the dominion of his father David and ruled over all the kingdoms from the Nile to the Euphrates (1 Ki. 4:21,24). The coming of this prince of peace from the tribe of Judah did not, however, exhaust the riches of this prophecy. Solomon was not the true Shiloh, for his kingdom was only temporary. There was to spring yet another, absolutely unique Ruler from Judah (cf. Isa. 11:1-10; Mic. 5:1-3). To Him the nations would resort and He would be great to the ends of the earth. He would bring true peace.

We know this Prince of Peace. It is our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. He is greater than Solomon. He came and preached peace to the peoples and nations which were far from God (Eph. 2:13,17). And we have submitted to His authority by accepting Him as our Lord and Saviour. It is interesting to note that the word used here for obedience (“and to Him shall be the obedience of the people”) means voluntary obedience. Our obedience to Christ is characterized by willingness, for it is the obedience of *faith* (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). The word in Genesis was translated by others (KJV, JND note) as “gathering” (“and unto him shall the gathering of the people be”). Christ is the Centre of attraction for all His own, who are gathered to Him. Through faith He draws us towards Himself and willingly we submit to His authority.

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\* Even the Talmud lists “Shiloh” as one of the names of the Messiah (Sanhedrin 98b). The most ancient commentary on the Book of Genesis also adopts this view (Bereshit Rabba 99). This interpretation is affirmed by the great Jewish commentator Rashi. The name “Shiloh” can easily be related to the word *Shalom*, the Hebrew word for *peace*. King Messiah will be the Prince of Peace (quoted from: “Jacob’s Dozen, a prophetic look at the tribes of Israel”, by William C. Varner).

However, this Messianic prophecy reaches even further into the future, as is made obvious by the verses quoted from Isaiah and Micah. It points all the way to the Kingdom of peace, which will be established after Christ's second coming. He will appear in majesty. He will be served and obeyed publicly by the nations and His dominion will be to the ends of the earth (Ps. 72:8; Zech. 9:10). Both for Israel and the nations of the earth He will be the Centre of blessing.

#### **2.3.4. The bliss of the Kingdom**

In keeping with this, the last verses of this blessing (vv. 11-12) describe the bliss of the Kingdom and the glory of the Prince of Peace. It would not be right to say that these verses only refer to Judah and foretell the fertility of Judah's inheritance in the land of Canaan. Apart from this historical explanation, these verses should also be applied in a prophetic and a spiritual sense.

From the link with verse 10 it is obvious that here too, the Messiah is the central figure: "Binding his donkey to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine..." (v. 11a). Vines will be in such abundant supply in the millennial Kingdom that they will be used even for this purpose. Christ rode into Jerusalem on a colt (cf. Zech. 9:9), which may be repeated at the time of His second coming to the people of Israel. Then they will cry out again, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" (Matt. 21:1-9; 23:39).

Abundance of wine is a most typical feature of the future Kingdom of peace (Isa. 25:6). When the curse is taken away from the earth, the mountains will drip with wine and milk (Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13). This abundance is also obvious from the words of verse 11b. The Davidic king will be able to wash his garments in wine and his clothes in the blood of grapes.

Note the remarkable contrast of this verse with John 2, where the wine gave out. Whenever people obey the words of

the Lord, shortage is turned into abundance. Wine is a well-known symbol of joy (Judg. 9:13; Ps. 104:15), a type of spiritual joy which Christ gives abundantly whenever He is granted His due place. Our joy can be full through present fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3-4).

The description of the personal glory of Christ is a nice ending of verse 12: "His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk". These contrasting colours enhance His beauty, as is also the case in the description of the Bridegroom in the Song of Solomon. Our Beloved is "white and ruddy" (Song 5:10-16). Our Lord will be made great in the Kingdom of peace, but this occurs even now in the company of His brethren. Because of the abundance of the blessings He grants us, we worship and adore Him.



## 2.4.

### ZEBULUN, A MERCHANT

*“Zebulun shall dwell by the haven of the sea;  
He shall become a haven for ships,  
And his border shall adjoin Sidon  
(or, his flank shall be toward Sidon)”  
(v. 13).*

#### 2.4.1. The Diaspora

The blessing of Zebulun raises various questions with the interpreters that they generally cannot answer unless they see the prophetic meaning of this chapter. The first problem here is the order: Zebulun – the sixth son of Leah – is put before Issachar, although he was born after him (Gen. 30:20). Secondly, this blessing is nothing else but the indication of his future inheritance in the Promised Land; nothing is said about Zebulun personally. Are these words meant to be an approval or a disapproval? In the third place, the fulfilment of this prophecy is doubted because Zebulun’s inheritance was not adjacent to the Mediterranean but rather, it was squeezed in between Asher and Naphtali.

All these questions can only be answered adequately if one recognizes this chapter as a prophetic survey of the whole history of the people of God. After the failure of Jacob’s first three sons, the prophecy about Judah and Shiloh is an obvious climax, dealing with the coming of the Messiah to His people and the dominion that would be given to Him. But as we know, He was despised and rejected of men and Israel was scattered

among the nations. It is this situation which we find in the blessing of Zebulun.

How nice it would have been if Jacob's last words could have ended with the blessing of Judah. Alas, it was not to be so, and the coming about of perfect salvation in the Messiah was postponed until the end time. As appears from the last blessings – those of Joseph and Benjamin – the promised blessing will come indeed. Christ will return and all His enemies will be made a footstool for His feet, while His brethren will pay Him homage. But for the time being, the people of Israel are put aside and they dwell among the Gentiles.

This is expressed in the name Zebulun (meaning “dwelling”) and the picture of the open sea, that is “the sea of peoples and nations” which always roars and never comes to rest (Isa. 17:12-13). Zebulun dwells “by the haven of the sea”, “at the seashore” (NASB), the shore where the ships are. The word for “by” or “at” originally indicates a direction. It is not an exact delimitation of Zebulun's inheritance! Zebulun would orientate himself towards the sea and shipping. He would have contact with sea merchants and conduct business with them. In the last line of his blessing we read that his border adjoined Sidon (or, that his flank was toward Sidon). Here Sidon represents the Phoenicians, the well-known ancient nation of merchants. The prophet Isaiah also speaks about the merchants of Sidon who cross the sea (Isa. 23:2).

All this offers a striking picture of the time of Israel's dispersion among the nations during the “times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24), which will last until the second coming of Christ. Israel dwells with the nations, is orientated towards them and conducts business with them. In the blessing of Issachar we shall see that this leads to submission to the nations, to lending oneself to servile labour.

Another consequence of this assimilation with the nations, viz. the adoption of idolatry, is even more serious. This will be seen in the prophecy about Dan. A first indication of this can be found in First Kings 16:31, where Sidon is mentioned as a

centre of the worship of Baal. After the Golden Age of David and Solomon the people of Israel gradually came under the influence of the surrounding nations and had to face the evil consequences of this.

### 2.4.2. Do not love the world

But everyone who, like Zebulun, turns his side toward Sidon, toward the world, will soon experience the negative consequences of this attitude. So we too should be aware of the fact that worldliness and idolatry go hand in hand. Revelation 2 shows very clearly that mingling with the world leads to idolatry. The church in Pergamos found its *dwelling place* in the world, where Satan's throne was, and in the church in Thyatira Jezebel was active as an idolatress. Both churches are rebuked for these evils: idolatry and adultery with the world.

It is important that we come across Jezebel here in the New Testament, as it shows that history has repeated itself. The Church did not do any better than the people of Israel. The worship of Baal, which was introduced under king Ahab through the influence of Jezebel (the prophets of Baal ate at her table), is paralleled by the practices of popery. In the last days, both the history of the apostate Church and that of apostate Judaism will end in a gruesome idolatry (2 Thess. 2:3-4; 1 John 2:18-22; Rev. 13, 17 and 18).

All this is the risk we run if we turn towards Sidon, towards the world. If we love the world, we shall lose sight of Christ and the greatness of the true Judah and Shiloh will fade away. Apart from the prophetic and spiritual application, these verses have – as we have already briefly seen – their historical meaning in connection with the period of the kings.

### 2.4.3. Rejoice, Zebulun

In the blessing of Moses we also find Zebulun in connection with the nations and the sea, *but this time he is not mentioned in a negative sense*. "And of Zebulun he said: 'Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out, and Issachar in your tents! They shall call the peoples to the mountain; there they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness; for they shall partake of the abundance of the seas and of treasures hidden in the sand'" (Deut. 33:18-19).

In this passage Zebulun and Issachar are bracketed together, as also in Jacob's last words the blessings of the two tribes are clearly linked. Being orientated towards the nations results in losing one's independence and in slavery. But Moses did not disapprove of Zebulun's orientation towards the nations and it is good to conclude with that. In the last days Israel's destiny will change for the better and God's people will be the centre of blessing for the whole earth. No longer will they assimilate into and be subjugated to Gentile nations, but the Gentiles will obey the law that will go forth from Zion. The peoples of the earth will flock to the mountain of the Lord and to the temple in the Kingdom of peace, as Isaiah foretold (2:1-5). It is this time to which Moses alluded when he blessed Zebulun and Issachar. They will exhort the peoples to come to Jerusalem with gifts, and together they will offer their treasures to the Prince of Peace.

It is also remarkable that Zebulun's inheritance was part of the area of Galilee, which Isaiah called the land of the *Gentiles*. It was in this far-away and despised part of the country that the Messiah was to live and work: "The land of Zebulun ... Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined" (Isa. 9:1-2; Matt. 4:15-16).

God's plan of salvation implied that Christ would be made a Light to the Gentiles (cf. Isa. 49:6). The light of His salvation, by which our sinful hearts have been enlightened, guarantees the blessing which will fall to the nations in the Kingdom of

peace. Christ will appear as the Sun of righteousness and the nations – along with Israel – will submit to His blessed rule. This is the perspective of the blessing of Zebulun, the tribe we always find linked with the nations in Scripture, both for the worse and – in the end – for the better.

## 2.5.

### ISSACHAR, A STRONG DONKEY

*"Issachar is a strong donkey,  
Lying down between two burdens (or, between the sheepfolds);  
He saw that rest was good,  
And that the land was pleasant;  
He bowed his shoulder to bear a burden,  
And became a band of slaves  
(or, became a slave at forced labour)"  
(vv. 14-15).*

#### 2.5.1. Serving the world

Perhaps Issachar can be best described as a person who is fond of ease and comfort, who always looks for advantage. Although he obtains peace and riches, he has to pay for them with his own freedom, for his prosperity is the result of his labouring for others. This is very aptly rendered by the picture of the beast of burden that is destined to bear burdens for others. Issachar is compared to a strong bony donkey (lit. "a donkey of bones"), lying down "between the sheepfolds" (NASB). This latter word has caused quite some trouble and has been rendered in various ways, as "burdens" (NKJV), "saddlebags" (NIV), "hurdles" (JND), "cattle-pens" (NEB), or "campfires" (NIV note). The only other occurrence in the same sense and the same context is in Judges 5:16, where it clearly indicates enclosures for cattle.

Just as a donkey looks for a suitable place to rest, the tribe of Issachar found a well-situated resting place in the land of

Canaan. A part of their tribal area was the plain of Jezreel, which was crossed by the important trade route from Phoenicia southward. This meant that Issachar found himself in a difficult position to maintain his independence and as a result he took part in trading and served the nations. The resting place he had seen was good and the land was pleasant (v. 15a), but it had the effect of his bowing down under the yoke of the nations (v. 15b). We are even told that he had to do forced labour (cf. also Josh. 16:10; 1 Ki. 9:21).

The situation in which Issachar finally found himself was not at all in accordance with God's purpose for His chosen people, as He had called Israel *to subdue the nations*. Moses had said that they would be set high above all nations, that they would be the head and not the tail (Deut. 28:1,13). But this would depend on Israel's obedience to God's commandments, and as soon as they forsook Him the roles would be reversed: they would be cursed and would have to serve the nations. So doing forced labour was a shameful thing for Issachar. It was the opposite of what should have been the normal relationship between Israel and the Gentiles.

Once this point is perfectly clear we shall have no difficulty in understanding the prophetic and spiritual meaning of this blessing. Issachar represents Israel in that phase of their history in which they were subdued to the nations and submitted to forced labour. An orientation towards the nations, as we have seen in the case of Zebulun, inevitably leads to subjugation to the nations. Presumably this is the reason of the order Zebulun–Issachar in these blessings, different from the normal order according to age which we often find in Scripture (cf. Gen. 30; Ex. 1; Num. 1 and 2; Ezek. 48; Rev. 7).

Chronologically, this subjugation to the nations took place after the era of David and Solomon; and it repeated itself after the coming and the rejection of Jesus Christ, the true Shiloh. Having been dispersed among the Gentiles, the Jews became a major people of traders usually serving foreign rulers. It is noteworthy that the meaning of the name Issachar – "hire", or

“wages” – refers to this as well. Israel became a bondservant of the Gentiles.

The spiritual lesson for us is obvious: if we associate with the world and forget about our being pilgrims, we shall inevitably come under the evil influence of the world. Then it will start to rule over us. This is confirmed by the prophetic history of the Church in Revelation 2 and 3. Pergamos dwelt where Satan’s throne was – just like Zebulun became orientated towards idolatrous Sidon – and therefore it was in peril of being overpowered by the world (Rev. 2:14). As a consequence, some followed the error of Balaam, “who loved the wages of unrighteousness” (2 Pet. 2:15). They became friends of the world *for profit* (Jude: 11). As Jude shows us, this path of decay ends in open apostasy and rebellion against God. In the blessings of Jacob this final stage is reached in the tribe following Issachar, viz. Dan, in whom the power of Satan is manifested to the full.

### 2.5.2. True Christian service

We should not only apply these things to the history of the people of God in general, but also to ourselves in a personal way. How many of God’s servants are, in fact, serving the world! But Paul did not want to be a servant of men; his only desire was to please God (Gal. 1:10). Issachar was an instrument in the hands of others and bowed down beneath their burdens. What about us? Are we instruments in the hands of the Lord alone, or are we guided by others or by human reasoning?

In Genesis 49 we note two contrasts with the strong donkey, the beast of burden which is Issachar (v. 14). In verse 11 we have a donkey that is available for Shiloh, the coming Messiah. In the same way we can be instruments for the exclusive use of the Master (cf. Luke 19:30-31). Then in verse 21 we have a deer let loose, which speaks of freedom *after bondage*. When God intervenes with His salvation (v. 18), the bondage of Issachar changes so to speak into the liberty of Naphtali.



What a blessing it is to enjoy the freedom by which Christ has made us free (Gal. 5:1)! Redeemed by Christ we are no longer slaves of strangers, but we serve Him alone. And we belong to the overcomers of Revelation 2 and 3, who expect their wages from Christ rather than from the world. It is only through the power of faith that we can overcome the world (1 John 5:4). Although Issachar was a strong donkey, natural strength is useless (Ex. 13:13). Let us never forget this and bear only the yoke of Christ.

## 2.6.

### DAN, A SERPENT

*“Dan shall judge his people  
As one of the tribes of Israel.  
Dan shall be a serpent by the way,  
A viper (or, horned snake) by the path,  
That bites the horse’s heels  
So that its rider shall fall backward.  
I have waited for Your salvation, O LORD!”  
(vv. 16-18).*

#### 2.6.1. Dan shall judge his people

Jacob commences this blessing with a pun on Dan’s name, as he also did with Judah (v. 8). Dan (meaning “judge”) was going to judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel (v. 16). Dan was the first son of Bilhah, Rachel’s maid, and to Rachel his birth proved that God had finally vindicated her in her conflict with Leah: “Then Rachel said, ‘God has judged my case; and He has also heard my voice and given me a son’. Therefore she called his name Dan” (Gen. 30:6). And according to Jacob’s last words, the meaning of this name was also to be reflected in Dan’s behaviour. He was to judge his own people just like one of the other tribes.

These words are generally understood to mean that Dan would not be inferior to the other sons of Jacob, although he was born of a maid. Like the other tribes Dan, too, would obtain a measure of independence for his people, his offspring. From the Books of Joshua and Judges we know that this took quite

some time, and that Dan did not always render judgment in the nicest way. Perhaps this is what Jacob refers to in verse 17 when he compares Dan with a dangerous serpent that overcomes its adversary by a surprise attack. The inheritance in the south that had originally been allotted to Dan proved to be too small, partly because of the resistance of the Amorites. So the Danites went to the northernmost part of the country and attacked the unsuspecting inhabitants of Laish or Leshem, whereupon they called the town Dan (Josh. 19:40-48; Judg. 1:34; 18:1-31). This town then became the northern border town of Israel, giving rise to the expression “all Israel from Dan to Beersheba” (in the south).

The words of this passage also remind us of the actions of that famous judge of the tribe of Dan, Samson, who managed to beat superior forces of the Philistines on his own – like a viper can bring down even a horseman. The horned snake, which is spoken of here, is a small sandy-coloured serpent deriving its name from two small scales above its eyes. Well camouflaged by its colour, it can launch lethal surprise attacks.

### 2.6.2. Dan shall be a serpent

The prophetic explanation of these verses follows naturally from this. In the previous blessings we have seen that Israel was to be dispersed among the Gentiles (Zebulun), and to be completely dependent on them (Issachar). In the future, however, a leader will arise who will be held in esteem and obtain a measure of independence again, but not without availing himself of very treacherous tactics. This future king of the Jews will be inspired by Satan himself, “that serpent of old...who deceives the whole world” (Rev. 12:9).

Of him one can truly say that there is *poison of asps* under his lips (cf. Rom. 3:13). He will pose as the Messiah, but in reality he is a false Christ who only looks like a lamb but speaks like the dragon. He will entice the majority of the Jewish people

into idolatry. This will happen halfway through Daniel's last week, when the antichrist will practise idolatry in the rebuilt temple of Jerusalem and will enforce worship both of himself and of the leader of the restored Roman empire. He will be the foolish shepherd foretold by Zechariah, who brings ruin to his people because he will reign ("judge") by the favour of the evil powers with whom he made a pact (Isa. 28:15; Dan. 9:27; 11:36-39; Zech. 11:15-17; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:3-4; Rev. 13:11-18).

Therefore this prophetic explanation suggests that the horse and its rider mentioned by Jacob in verse 17 do not symbolize Israel's enemies but Israel itself. In Exodus 15:1,21 the horse and its rider symbolize the power of Pharaoh, but in Isaiah 63:13 this figure is also used for Israel ("Who led them through the deep, as a horse in the wilderness, that they might not stumble?"). So it is fully justifiable to regard Jacob's words as a prophetic reference to the treacherous behaviour of the antichrist, who will cause the downfall of his own people, rendering them completely powerless.

It is not right to interpret Jacob's prophecy as a wish, as some translations do ("May Dan be a serpent in the way", etc). Here we have nothing but a picture of Dan's *acts*, with respect to his enemies from the historical point of view, and with respect to his own people from the prophetic point of view. Besides, how could one link verse 17 with verse 18 if one interprets it as a wish or as something favourable? There would be no need then to wait for divine help!

But there is really nothing more unfavourable and disastrous than the acts of the antichrist. The activity of evil in the last days and Israel's complete powerlessness before the return of the Lord are enough reasons to pray for God's salvation. Israel's help is only from above, from the God of their fathers, and in these verses Jacob expresses the thoughts and feelings of the faithful remnant of those days.

So this verse points to the coming of the antichrist and seems to indicate that he will spring from Dan. It is common in

this respect to point out that Dan is missing in the list of those sealed from the tribes of Israel, in Revelation 7. Beyond that, we often find Dan mentioned in connection with apostasy and idolatry. In Leviticus 24 a Danite was the first Israelite to blaspheme. In Judges 18 the Danites introduced an idolatrous cult in their new place of residence. In First Kings 12 Jeroboam instituted the worship of the calves he had made, in Bethel and in Dan.

Finally, one could think of a certain analogy between the serpent's way of acting in verse 17 and that of the serpent's seed in Genesis 3:15, which would bruise the woman's seed on the heel (NASB). Satan's actions are always directed against the Messiah (the woman's Seed) and His people. It has been like that in the past and it will be so in the future. In the reign of the antichrist Satan's power will be fully manifested.

### 2.6.3. The salvation of the LORD

Once this low point in the history of Israel has been reached, the time is ripe for the revelation of the LORD's salvation (v. 18). When man's corruption and the power of the evil one are manifested to their full extent in the antichrist, the man of sin, only the LORD will be able to bring relief. He will do so by revealing *His* help, the salvation of which He is the Source and which He has prepared for all those who love His appearing. Besides, this is always the glorious answer to our need. When the only thing left for us is to confess that we are totally helpless, He will show His deliverance, His salvation.

Jacob had waited for this and so he prayed: "I have waited for Your salvation, O LORD!" Genesis 49:18 is the first of some eighty occurrences of the word *salvation* (yeshua) in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is especially prominent in the Psalms and in the Book of Isaiah (cf. Isa. 12:2-3; 49:6; 62:11). Sometimes it becomes synonymous with the Messiah, the One who is salvation personified – Him whose Name is Jesus or Yeshua (Matt. 1:21).

Jacob was praying for more than just a temporal deliverance; he was expressing his longing for a personal Deliverer, the long-awaited Saviour.

Those prophetic words will be repeated by the remnant in the fearful circumstances of the Great Tribulation (Ps. 3:8; 38:22; 39:7; 119:166). In the past Israel got to know the salvation of the LORD on the shores of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:13). And in the future they will again be delivered by Him from all their enemies, and enter into their inheritance. Again, the LORD will fight for them and they will hold their peace. Like Jonah they will get on firm ground, once they acknowledge that salvation is of the LORD (Jon. 2:9-10).

Upon the second coming of the Saviour, both this outward salvation from the enemies and the inner redemption from all their sins, will be their blessed portion (Isa. 53:5-12; Zech. 12:10; 13:1). The power of the antichrist and of the ruler of the restored Roman empire will be destroyed; and Satan will be bound for a thousand years (2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 19:20; 20:2). The whole creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption, and Christ will assume His reign.

No doubt it is a good thing also for us to "wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (Lam. 3:26). We already got to know this salvation through the first coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have seen it in His death and in His resurrection. He was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised because of our justification (Rom. 4:25). But the salvation of the Lord in all its fullness, its ultimate happiness, will only be our portion at His second coming. By grace we have been saved through faith, but we still wait for God's Son from heaven to transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body. He will bring us to that place where sin cannot enter (Phil. 3:20-21).

This prophetic utterance also applies to the Church in its responsibility, because it has thoroughly failed in its testimony here on earth. This is confirmed by the prophetic history of the Church as described in Revelation 2 and 3. In the same way as

the tribe of Dan in the course of Israel's history was connected with the introduction of idolatry, this happened with Pergamos and Thyatira in the history of the professing Church (Rev. 2:14,20). So the low point reached with Dan in Genesis 49 finds its counterpart in the apostate Church of the Revelation, which in its ultimate form is described as Babylon the great (Rev. 17 and 18). According to Scripture, Babylon is the cradle of idolatry (Gen. 11:1-9; Josh. 24:2; Zech. 5:5-11).

While nominal Christendom hurries towards its judgment, a remnant holds fast to what was originally entrusted to the Church and maintains its testimony until Christ's coming. In Revelation 2 and 3 this remnant is seen in those who have no part in the general corruption and for that reason are called the overcomers. Like Jacob, they wait for the salvation of the Lord. Upon His second coming Christ will bring relief for His own.

Finally, there are some practical lessons in view of our personal life of faith. Amidst all apostasy, we may count on God's help and relief, so that we act as overcomers who remain faithful to the Word and the Name of Christ. Even now, while we look forward to the full salvation that awaits us, we experience God's mighty hand in our present circumstances.

We can also draw a parallel between Jacob's prayer for the revelation of God's salvation and the prayer of Romans 7:24 for deliverance from the power of sin and death. The words of Jacob form the turning point of Genesis 49, and the short prayer at the end of Romans 7 is the turning point in the Christian's struggle with the power of indwelling sin. In the following sons of Jacob (Gad, Asher and Naphtali) we shall see a picture of the blessings which are the portion of the overcomer. In the same way Romans 8 depicts the Christian's life of victory in the power of the Spirit of God. Here we see the practical results of God's salvation and of the deliverance we enjoy through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us conclude with a few positive remarks on the tribe of Dan. In the blessing of Moses we read the following: "Dan is a lion's whelp; he shall leap from Bashan" (Deut. 33:22). There is

still a blessing for Dan as far as the ultimate possession of Israel's inheritance in the Promised Land is concerned. Nothing negative is stated about him here. On the contrary, he takes his possession as a strong young lion.

In Ezekiel 48, Dan is not left out in the division of the land at the beginning of the Kingdom of peace, and is even one of the first tribes receiving his inheritance in the north of Israel. God's grace will triumph over man's evil and the power of Satan, which in the history of this tribe was very clearly manifested and which (from a prophetic point of view) will be unfolded to its full extent after the rapture of the Church.



## 2.7.

### GAD, AN OVERCOMER

*“Gad, a troop shall tramp upon him,  
But he shall triumph at last  
(or, raiders shall raid him,  
but he shall raid at their heels)”  
(v. 19).*

#### 2.7.1. Through warfare to victory

Dan is not followed by his brother Naphtali, Bilhah’s second son, but by Gad, the eldest son of Leah’s maid Zilpah (cf. Gen. 30:7-11). No doubt this order has to do again with the prophetic pattern on which Genesis 49 is founded, namely that the conflicts represented by Dan and Gad precede the richness of blessing presented to us in Asher and Naphtali.

This blessing contains several references to the meaning of the name Gad (“troop” or “band”). In Genesis 30:11, the word seems to be related with “[good] fortune”. But here the name is linked with the word “troop” or “[a band of] raiders” as well as with the verb “to tramp” or “to raid” (cf. also 1 Sam. 30:8, 15, 23; 1 Ki. 11:24; 2 Ki. 5:2 and Hab. 3:16). In the end, the troops threatening Gad will be defeated and chased by him. Gad will be hot on the heels of his enemies, or in the words of the NKJV: “But he shall triumph at last”. He will chase them and dispel them.

From a historical point of view it is easy to recognize the importance of this blessing. Gad’s inheritance was situated on the east side of Jordan and was often exposed to attacks from

the east and the south by Arabian desert peoples and by the Ammonites. Proving their martial spirit, however, the Gadites repeatedly succeeded in defeating these hostile troops. Jephthah defeated the advancing Ammonites (Judg. 11); and along with the other two tribes living on the east side of Jordan, the Gadites defeated the Hagarites (1 Chr. 5:10; 18-22). The bravery of the Gadites who joined David when he was still on the run from Saul is amply praised (1 Chr. 12:8-15). They looked like lions and were fast like mountain gazelles. Obviously, the blessing of Jacob has a lot in common with that of Moses, in which the bravery of Gad is also commended since they had not only conquered their own inheritance on the east side of the Jordan, but also helped in the conquest of Canaan (Deut. 33:20-21).

From a prophetic point of view Gad typifies the bravery of the remnant of Israel at the second coming of Christ, with a view to the establishment of the Kingdom of peace. Just as David of old had his mighty men, the Messiah will use His heroes to defeat His enemies and to establish His Kingdom (Isa. 11:14; Mic. 4:13; 5:7-8; Zech. 12:6).

This phase of the manifestation of the Lord's salvation will take place after the judgment on the beast (the Roman prince), the false prophet (the antichrist) and their armies, which will be executed by the Lord Himself at His appearing (Rev. 19:11-21). We have seen this in the prophecy on Dan, which speaks about the activities of the antichrist and the longings of the faithful remnant. And understandably, the prophecy on Gad takes us a step further and shows us how the Lord through warfare will lead His people to victory over the surrounding nations.

### **2.7.2. God gives us the victory**

But we can also apply these things to ourselves. We have already referred to the overcomers in Revelation 2 and 3. Amidst all the conflicts resulting from the failure of the Church in its

responsibility, the Lord leads His own through warfare to victory. Thus they go from strength to strength and receive His divine help in the battle against the surrounding enemies. When thinking of such dangers as abandoning the first love (Ephesus), persecution and slander (Smyrna), mingling with the world (Pergamos), false prophecy (Thyatira), formalism (Sardis), Judaism (Philadelphia) and spiritual lukewarmness (Laodicea), we can only stand against them in the strength of the Lord, by taking heed of His Word. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22).

In a practical sense, the same thing goes for the conflict with indwelling sin, as described in Romans 7. The call for salvation and deliverance, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" is answered in that our eyes are turned to what God has done in Christ: "I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" By the finished work of the Lord Jesus, God has manifested *His* salvation, delivering us from the law of sin and death. So we lead a life of victory in the power of the Holy Spirit, while we also look forward to the full salvation that awaits us at Christ's second coming. This is the theme of Romans 8, which shows that God turns His redeemed into conquerors – also with a view to the dangers from the outside world, which will threaten us as long as Satan is the prince of this world (Rom. 8:35-37).

So the prophecy on Gad shows that victory after warfare is the result of the manifestation of God's salvation. Prophetically this is true for Israel, spiritually and practically it is true for ourselves as well. The Lord would like to make us overcomers here on earth, no matter on which front the battle may rage. The following prophecies show the further results of the salvation of the Lord (Asher and Naphtali), while the climax of it all is that our eyes are turned to the glory of Christ Himself (as seen in Joseph and Benjamin).

## 2.8.

### ASHER, A HAPPY MAN

*“Bread from Asher shall be rich,  
And he shall yield royal dainties”  
(v. 20).*

#### 2.8.1. Food in abundance

When Asher was born, Leah said: “I am happy, for the daughters will call me blessed” (Gen. 30:13). So she called his name Asher – meaning “happy”. Both the blessings of Jacob and Moses for Asher are in full agreement with this, as both prophecies depict Asher as a real child of fortune.

Asher was given a very fertile inheritance in Canaan, namely the coastal area from the Carmel to Greater Sidon (Josh. 19:24-31). It yielded abundant supplies of food, like wheat and oil, both for the tribe itself and for neighbouring Phoenicia. Presumably king Solomon provided his friend Hiram, the king of Tyre with wheat and olive oil from the area of Asher in exchange for all the timber supplied to Solomon for the building of the temple (1 Ki. 5:11). Perhaps the second line of Jacob’s blessing refers to these deliveries to the court of Hiram (cf. also Ezek. 27:17).

In the blessing of Moses the abundance of olive oil in Asher’s inheritance is rendered by the picture of Asher dipping his foot in oil: “Asher is most blessed of sons; let him be favoured by his brothers, and let him dip his foot in oil” (Deut. 33:24).

This blessing is a prophetic reference to the wealth and

prosperity that Israel will enjoy during the millennium, when the great conflicts of the last days are over (see the previous chapters). There will be an abundance of grain in the land (Ps. 72:16; 85:12). The heavens shall answer the earth and the earth shall answer with grain, with new wine and with oil, and they shall answer Jezreel (Hos. 2:21-22). The threshing floors shall be full of wheat and the vats shall overflow with new wine and oil. The mountains shall drip with new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk (Joel 2:19,24; 3:18). The plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed (Amos 9:13).

Once the Lord has restored their fortunes and has blessed His people, they will enjoy an abundance of food. The land will also yield royal dainties and thus provide for the needs of others. In and through the people of Israel, the whole earth shall be blessed. The nations shall walk in the light of the Lord and they shall take part in the feast which the Lord will make for them (Isa. 25:6).

The spiritual application follows naturally from this. We get a picture of the wealth of the victor who emerges unharmed from the battle – compare in this respect the various promises of blessing to the overcomers in Revelation 2 and 3. We are also led to think of the believer's *present* portion, as he is enriched in everything by Him and blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (1 Cor. 1:5; Eph. 1:3; Col. 2:2).

We too can enjoy an abundance of spiritual food. Like Asher, we enjoy precious food and can share it with others, e.g. the knowledge of all the mysteries made known to us through the ministry of the apostle Paul, on which mature Christians feed (1 Cor. 3:1-2; 4:1; Eph. 4:13-14; Heb. 5:13-14). These mysteries are truly “royal dainties”, fitting to the exalted position that God has given to His children.

The rich and fertile inheritance of Asher can also be compared to that good part which Mary had chosen and which would not be taken away from her (Luke 10:42). While sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to His Word, we eat and are

satisfied. Christ has come that His sheep may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly (John 10:10). In the Psalms we also read about the fullness of God's house and the "marrow and fatness" with which our souls are satisfied (Ps. 36:8; 63:5).

### 2.8.2. Life through the Spirit

The expression "Bread from Asher shall be rich", seems to refer mainly to the abundance of olives and olive oil in Asher's territory; this thought is confirmed by the blessing of Moses. So first of all, this picture reminds us of the activity of the Spirit of God, which is commonly symbolized by oil (cf. Zech. 4:2,6,14; Matt. 25:1-13; 2 Cor. 1:21-22). The working of the Spirit is the source of power for our testimony down here and also the basis for showing true brotherly love. In the blessing of Moses, the brotherly love experienced by Asher is expressly linked with his riches of oil: "Let him be favoured by his brothers, and let him dip his foot in oil" (Deut. 33:24). It is in an atmosphere of brotherly unity that the Spirit can work unhindered (cf. Ps. 133:1-2).

From a practical point of view there is a clear link between this blessing and Romans 8, because the Christian's life of victory is obviously a life in the power of the Spirit of God (the "oil"). The indwelling Spirit manifests the life of Christ in us. While the prophecy about Gad had to do with victory over the power of indwelling sin, the life by the Spirit which results from this is seen here with Asher. It is a rich and fruitful life, as the Spirit produces fruit for God in us (Rom. 8:4-14). Following on this, the blessing of Naphtali shows the jubilant song of Christian liberty (Rom. 8:15-16).

So with Gad the principal idea is triumph and victory, with Asher it is *fruitfulness* and with Naphtali *freedom*. All the privileges and the blessings of the Christian, however, spring from God's salvation for which Jacob had faithfully waited – and

which has now been manifested to us in Christ's death and resurrection. So we can live as true Asherites and happy children of God, for the glory of His name and the good of others.

## 2.9.

# NAPHTALI, A HIND LET LOOSE

*“Naphtali is a deer let loose;  
He gives goodly words”  
(v. 21).*

### 2.9.1. The song of liberty

Here in Genesis 49, Naphtali is the last of the four sons born of the maids of Jacob’s wives – although in Genesis 30 he is mentioned as the second one, before Gad and Asher. This deviation from the chronological order must be explained in the light of the fact that his blessing marks a special climax, after the low point reached with Dan and the prayer for the intervention of the LORD’s salvation (v. 18). While Gad and Asher show the victorious power and abundance resulting from God’s saving grace, Naphtali shows its most glorious fruit: the jubilant song of liberty.

It is remarkable indeed that the idea of *freedom* (“Naphtali is a deer let loose”) should be expressed by the son of a maid. Here we have a clear contrast with Issachar who, although not born of a maid, became a slave at forced labour (v. 15 NASB). Issachar was a workhorse, whereas Naphtali was a deer let loose, having the greatest possible freedom of movement. A deer let loose is not hindered by anything in its fast course and it feels completely free. The meaning of the name Naphtali (“my wrestling”, cf. Gen. 30:8) suggests that this freedom could not be obtained without wrestling.

Concerning the historical fulfilment of this verse, several



expositors point to the readiness and fitness of the men of Naphtali for the conflict with Jabin and Sisera (Judg. 4). Led by Barak the judge, a Naphtalite, the northern tribes managed to struggle out of the grasp of Jabin, the king of Canaan. Like fast deer, they followed Barak into battle and towards a new freedom. Their gratitude for their salvation is expressed in the then following song of Deborah (Judg. 5), which seems to be one instance of those “goodly words” to which Jacob referred.

The picture of a deer let loose is, in fact, changed here into that of a singer, but the connection is clear. The new liberty leads to “words of praise and thanksgiving”, as it says in an old Aramaic translation. So it is not necessary to read “fawns” instead of “words”, as some (RSV, NIV) do for the sake of the connection between the two parts of this blessing (“that bears beautiful fawns”). Others even go to the point of giving up the picture of the deer and replacing it with that of an oak putting forth beautiful boughs (NEB). However, these corrections of the Hebrew text are dubious.

The picture of a deer or a doe is also used elsewhere in Scripture to indicate the speed and suppleness of warriors (2 Sam. 2:18; 1 Chr. 12:8). David says that God makes his feet like the feet of a deer and sets him on high places (2 Sam. 22:34; Ps. 18:33); the same comparison is made by the prophet Habakkuk (3:19). Like a deer walking on its high places, Naphtali has entered the heights of his inheritance in the north of Canaan.

Also very interesting is the expression “set to the deer of the dawn” or “upon the hind of the morning” in the heading of Psalm 22. This is a prophetic reference to the new day that was dawning after Christ had fought his fight all alone on Calvary’s cross. Luther links the heading of this Psalm with Christ’s arrest during the night and His trial before the Sanhedrin early in the morning, and translates “the hind that is early chased”. According to others we are reminded here of the lamb of the morning sacrifice (a very striking picture of Christ’s sacrifice), that was offered as soon as the watchman on the pinnacle of the

temple announced the new day. In Jewish tradition, the first rays of daylight are likened to the horns of a hind – “like two horns of light, rising from the East and filling the world with light” (F. Delitzsch).

### 2.9.2. True liberty

This is important for our subject, since true liberty – both for Israel and the Gentiles – can be based only upon the finished work of Christ. In the first part of Psalm 22 we find His struggle and His final release (vv. 1-21), while the second part contains the beautiful or goodly words which are the result of this (vv. 22-31). As death could not hold Him, the night of sufferings was followed by the morning of freedom and praise. In His resurrection Christ received the divine answer to His sufferings (v. 21b), so that He now sings praises in the midst of His brethren to whom He reveals the Father’s name (v. 22; Heb. 2:12).

This being the present result for the Church, He will very soon sing God’s praises in the great assembly of Israel, restored and regathered in their land (vv. 23-26). And in the Kingdom of peace these praises will be heard as far as the ends of the earth (vv. 27-28), for all the nations will bow before the Prince of Peace. Thus Calvary’s blessings are extended over the whole earth, even into the distant future.

At the same time this explains the spiritual and prophetic meaning of the blessing of Naphtali. On the cross of Christ light and darkness met and a righteous basis was laid for the revelation of the light of God’s salvation that has ever since filled the earth, and will fill it publicly when the millennium dawns.

The Christian’s life in the light, the freedom of sonship after bondage under the law of sin and death, the jubilant song of the redeemed leading them to worship the Father: it is all founded on the finished work of Christ and His deliverance from the

bonds of death. Being united with Him, we too, walk in the liberty of the Spirit, the freedom of Christ's resurrection from the dead, while the "beautiful words" of the song of redemption flow from our lips. All these privileges, which culminate in worshipping the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit, are mentioned in Romans chapter 8.

As far as the prophetic history of the Church is concerned – of which Genesis 49 also offers us a brief sketch – Naphtali shows us the renewal of the song of praise already mentioned in the blessing of Judah. As soon as the Church mingles with the world (Zebulun) and is dominated by worldly principles (Issachar), the song of praise in honour of the Father and the Son disappears from their midst. The faithful remnant, however, which waits for the revelation of God's salvation, does enjoy this privilege. Not only do they overcome their enemies (Gad) and eat rich food (Asher), but because of the freedom they enjoy they are true worshippers. Such is the spiritual application of the blessing of Naphtali. The redeemed of the Lord sing their heavenly songs to the glory of Him who brought them to God by His blood, and who is worthy to receive praise and honour to all eternity (cf. Rev. 5).

Parallel to this runs the prophetic meaning of this verse for Israel, which will sing a new song in the millennium here on earth. After all the struggles of the end time, a Sabbath rest will remain for both the people of God and the whole creation (cf. Ps. 92, 96, 98). Then a Year of Jubilee for the land and the people will be proclaimed, during which Zion will be comforted and will be anointed with the oil of gladness (Lev. 25; Isa. 35:10; 51:11; 61:1-3). The song of thanksgiving for their deliverance will resound (Isa. 25-26), and the "goodly words" of the redeemed of the Lord will be heard. In that day all Israel will enjoy what is said of Naphtali in the blessing of Moses: that he will be "satisfied with favour, and full of the blessing of the LORD" (Deut. 33:23).

2.10.

**JOSEPH, A FRUITFUL BOUGH**

*“Joseph is a fruitful bough,  
A fruitful bough by a well;  
His branches run over the wall.*

*The archers have bitterly grieved him,  
Shot at him and hated him.  
But his bow remained in strength,  
And the arms of his hands were made strong (or, agile)  
By the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob  
(From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),  
By the God of your father who will help you,  
And by the Almighty who will bless you  
With blessings of heaven above,  
Blessings of the deep that lies beneath,  
Blessings of the breasts and of the womb.*

*The blessings of your father  
Have excelled the blessings of my ancestors,  
Up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills.  
They shall be on the head of Joseph,  
And on the crown of the head of  
him who was separate from his brothers  
(or, the one distinguished among his brothers)”  
(vv. 22-26).*

### 2.10.1. A fruitful tree

Joseph was the son whom Jacob loved most (cf. Gen 37:3). This is confirmed by the length and the import of his blessing. When reading it, one cannot but think of what was said of Isaac, Abraham's beloved son: "...and to him he has given *all that he has*" (Gen. 24:36). In fact, all these blessings granted to Joseph encompass much more than what *Jacob* possessed and could give to his son. Jacob spoke about all that *God* had set apart for Joseph and his offspring. As a prophet he announced this divine blessing, which is defined mainly in the last two verses (vv. 25-26), and is preceded by two comparisons.

First of all, Joseph was a fruitful tree or vine, the branches of which run over the wall (v. 22). This picture is then followed by a totally different figure, namely that of an archer. Joseph was also an able archer who did not succumb to the attacks of his enemies, because God gave him strength (vv. 23-24). So the blessing is really in three parts. In the last part Joseph is described as the "prince" (NIV, NEB), or "the one distinguished" (NASB) among his brothers (cf. Deut. 33:16). Others read here, "him who was *separate* from his brothers" (NKJV, RSV), or "the one *separated* from his brothers" (JND, NIV note). This is the first instance in Scripture where we find the idea of the Nazirite, a person separated wholly unto the Lord.

In all these aspects – fruitful tree, archer and prince – Joseph is a striking type of Christ. One can say that Joseph both in his humiliation and his exaltation is one of the most beautiful types of Christ. This is clearly demonstrated in the New Testament too, for in Stephen's speech in Acts 7 the *sufferings* of the Messiah inflicted by His own people are illustrated by the experiences of Joseph and Moses. In the same way as Joseph was hated by his brothers and sold to be a slave in Egypt, Jesus was not received by "His own" (John 1:11) and delivered into the hands of the Gentiles. Similarly, Moses was denied and rejected by his kin when he came to them the first time.

But in his *exaltation* Joseph is also a type of Christ. God was with Joseph and saved him out of all his troubles, making him lord over the land of Egypt. In the same way Christ was delivered from the bonds of death and exalted to sit at the right hand of God, as the true Zaphnath-Paaneah, the Saviour of life and of the world (cf. Joseph's new name in Gen. 41:45). Everyone has to come to Christ now in order to receive the bread of life.

In the picture of the fruitful bough, a young fruit tree or vine (lit., "son of one who bears fruit"), we see two features of Christ's life in humiliation here on earth. He lived (1) a life of perfect dependence on God, and (2) He bore much fruit for Him. The fruitful bough by a well (v. 22a) reminds us of the well-known picture of the tree planted by streams of water (Ps. 1:3; Jer. 17:8). As the dependent Man, Christ found all His resources in God, so that He could bear fruit both within Israel and among the Gentiles. His work among the Gentiles is mentioned in the second part of verse 22: "His branches run *over the wall*". His ministry was also fruitful outside the dividing wall between Israel and the nations (for the Israelites were enclosed by the Law and thereby separated from the nations). One example of this is His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well and the subsequent conversion of the Samaritans (John 4).

This bearing of fruit is not limited to Christ's life on earth, for it continues up till now by the Spirit sent down from heaven. In this way He still bears much fruit outside the vineyard of Israel. God's grace has appeared to all men, causing fruit for God in the whole world. As for the life of Joseph himself, the fruitfulness mentioned here is usually linked with the birth of Ephraim (meaning "fruitful"). God had caused him to be fruitful in the land of his affliction, for to him were born two sons before the years of famine came (Gen. 41:50-52).

### 2.10.2. An archer

In the following verses we find the more active picture of the archer who is besieged by his enemies. The archers (lit., “masters of the arrows”) plagued him with such an intense hostility that no less than three different verbs are used in verse 23 to express this (“they have bitterly grieved him, shot at him and hated him”). Applied to Joseph, these verses probably refer to the hostility of his brothers and his trials in Potiphar’s house.

Their reference to Christ is also quite clear. How many arrows were shot at Him! The Jewish leaders were hostile towards Him and continually harassed Him. The prophet Jeremiah compares a tongue speaking deceit to a deadly arrow (Jer. 9:8 NASB). Many a deceptive question was fired at Christ, but He was able to fend off all these “arrows” (cf. Matt. 22:15-46).

One is also reminded of the temptation in the wilderness, where Satan fired his sharpest arrows at Christ in vain. At last, this “master of the arrows” had to acknowledge Christ’s superiority and when he had ended every temptation, he departed from Him. Christ was able to fend off his attacks each time by taking another accurate arrow out of the “quiver” of Scripture. Satan was no match for the repeated words, “It is written”.

This is always the secret of strength in spiritual warfare. By the wisdom of God’s Word, Christ as the dependent Man was victorious over the adversary. And we too, can only stand firm by the strength with which God provides us through His Word. We see this also in Joseph’s life: “Until the time that his word came to pass, the word of the LORD tested him” (Ps. 105:19). Thus he was strengthened and also tried by the Word of God.

This principle of total dependence on God in warfare is elaborated in verse 24: “But his bow remained in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong (or, agile) *by the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob*”. The figure used here is that God

Himself puts His strong hands on the archer's arms to support him and to make his movements strong and supple. God is the perfect Helper of the warrior, for He is the "Mighty God of Jacob" (see for this expression also Isa. 1:24; 49:26; 60:16 and Ps. 132:2,5).

From his own experience Jacob knew how powerful God was to help out and bring relief even in the most difficult situations. By the end of his life, Jacob had an intimate knowledge of God, as is testified by the other titles he used for God in this passage. God was also "the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel" (v. 24b), "the God of your father", and "the Almighty" (v. 25a). As the Stone, or the Rock, God is the solid foundation upon which faith can build (cf. Deut. 32:4,18; Ps. 18:31; 31:2-3; 62:2,6-7). Christ is both the cornerstone and the capstone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God (Isa. 28:16; Ps. 118:22; Zech. 4:7; Matt. 21:42).

There is also much teaching in Scripture about God as the Shepherd of His people. In the preceding chapter Jacob said that God had been his Shepherd all his life to that day (Gen. 48:15 NASB). Like David, we can say in a personal way: "The Lord is *my* Shepherd" (Ps. 23:1). In the future, Israel will be led by *one* Shepherd (Ezek. 34:23). Christ is the *good* Shepherd (John 10:11,14), the *great* Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20), but also the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4).

Verses 24 and 25 are, in fact, one long sentence depicting the various features of God as the One who strengthens and supports the archer. Apart from knowing God as the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel and the Mighty God of Jacob, the patriarch also knew Him as his God and as the Almighty. And his wish for his son was that *He* would help him too and that the Almighty would bless him. As the Almighty, God had revealed Himself in a special way to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 17:1; 28:3; Ex. 6:3), and as such He is the Source of all blessing for His own.



### 2.10.3. A threefold blessing

Mentioning God the Almighty led Jacob to the actual blessings that were to be Joseph's portion: "And by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb" (v. 25). It was a threefold blessing, encompassing in the first place the good gifts from above, such as rain, dew and sunshine; secondly, that which lies beneath, like subterranean water reservoirs feeding brooks and streams (Deut. 8:7; 33:13); and thirdly, that which is given to man here on earth – human and animal fertility.

So Joseph was blessed in all aspects. The historical fulfilment of this prophecy can be seen in the large and fertile inheritance of Ephraim and Manasseh in the land of Canaan. Thus Joseph received – in his two sons – the *double* portion to which the firstborn was entitled. But Judah was to be the *royal* tribe, as we have seen before.

The blessings laid up for Joseph were so rich that Jacob could say: "The blessings of your father (that is, the blessings given by your father) have excelled the blessings of my ancestors" (v. 26a). So Joseph's blessing surpassed all the previous blessings which God had given to the patriarchs. Some modern translations have "ancient mountains" (NIV) or "eternal mountains" (RSV), instead of "ancestors". This thought would be repeated then in the next sentence: "Up to the utmost bound (or, the bounty) of the everlasting hills".

The best produce of the land, its choicest fruits (cf. Gen. 27:28; Deut. 33:15-16), it should all so to speak be heaped on Joseph's head, as is said in verse 26b: "They shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers" (or, the one distinguished among his brothers). Perhaps we have to think here of the laying on of hands, as Jacob laid his hands on Joseph's head to bless him. Being a prophet, he was the channel of the divine blessing that had been prepared for Joseph.

This last part of the blessing (vv. 25-26) has much in common with Moses' blessing of Joseph (Deut. 33:13-16). When speaking of the favour of Him who dwelt in the bush, Moses mentioned yet another feature of God. This is how Moses had come to know God: as the holy One who could dwell among a sinful people, although He was a consuming fire. Apart from all the other blessings, the divine favour of Him who dwelt in the bush would come on the head of Joseph, who is again called the one who was separate from his brothers. The literal meaning of the word used here is "the one separated" or "the Nazirite", a well-known idea from the life of Samson and the law of the Nazirite in Numbers 6.

Joseph had a special and separate place among his brothers. And in this respect he also is a beautiful type of Christ as the One who was devoted to God, and who was recognized as the Firstborn among many brethren. During His life here on earth, Christ was fully dedicated to His God and Father. And after having put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, He now lives to God in the holiness of heaven (Rom. 6:10; John 17:19). He is the true Nazirite, the true Joseph, to whom all blessings are given (Joseph means "He will add", or "may the Lord add"). Indeed, the Father has given all things into the hands of His beloved Son (John 3:35). God has met Him with the blessings of goodness, and He has blessed Him for ever (Ps. 21:3; 45:2).

By faith we know Him too as the blessed Son of the Father and the Heir of all things in heaven and on earth. When we contemplate Him as such, we know that we (as His brethren) are also blessed with every blessing in the Beloved. He is coming quickly to bring us to glory and to introduce us into the glory which He has prepared for His brethren and companions. Then we shall receive the full measure of our salvation, for which we are presently still waiting (cf. Gen. 49:18; Rom. 8:23). But even now His desire is to be glorified in the saints, so that they are conformed to His image. The purpose of all spiritual growth is that He, the Firstborn among many brethren, is seen in us (Rom. 8:29).

But at His return His earthly people will also get to know Him as the Lord from heaven, whom God has showered with honour and blessing. In the same way as Joseph's brothers bowed down before the one they had once rejected and delivered up to the nations, the people of Israel will repent and bow before the exalted Christ. They will look on Him whom they have pierced (Zech. 12:10). At His appearing He will not only bless the remnant of His people, but also utterly destroy His enemies. This judgment will introduce the restoration of all things. This is shown in type in the blessing of Benjamin.

## 2.11.

# BENJAMIN, A WOLF

*“Benjamin is a ravenous wolf;  
In the morning he shall devour the prey,  
And at night (or, in the evening)  
he shall divide the spoil”  
(v. 27).*

### 2.11.1. A ravenous wolf

The picture of the ravenous wolf symbolizes the fighting spirit as well as the speed with which Benjamin overpowered his enemies. The wolf is not always spoken of favourably in the Old Testament (cf. Jer. 5:6; Ezek. 22:27; Hab. 1:8; Zeph. 3:3). The fact that both the morning and the evening are mentioned here indicates that he is *always* successful in battle.

Many an example can be given of the fighting spirit of the tribe of Benjamin. Well-known Benjamites were the judge Ehud (Judg. 3:15), king Saul and his son Jonathan, Shimei and Sheba, who revolted against David, Mordecai (Esther 2:5) and the apostle Paul (Phil. 3:5). All of them were men with a fighting spirit. Before his conversion Paul persecuted the Church of God, and after his conversion he fought for it like no one else. Mordecai and Esther fought for the sake of God’s people and divided the spoil of Haman and his allies.

When we think of “dividing the spoil”, we can also think of all that Saul by his victories accomplished for Israel, so that he could clothe the daughters of Israel in scarlet, with luxury (2 Sam. 1:24). Jonathan, fighting the battle of faith, also gained

a great victory (1 Sam. 14:1-45). The tribe of Benjamin included many able slingers and archers (Judg. 20:16; 1 Chr. 8:40; 12:2; 2 Chr. 14:8; 17:17). So we have plenty of examples showing the appropriateness of this blessing.

Moses' blessing of Benjamin has a wholly different character as it depicts Benjamin as the beloved of the Lord, who dwells with Him in safety and is shielded by Him (Deut. 33:12). In Deuteronomy the subject of the blessing is not Benjamin's character but his inheritance in the Promised Land, and the special favour shown to him in that God had His sanctuary in his territory.

### 2.11.2. He shall divide the spoil

From a prophetic point of view, Benjamin offers us a type of the returning Christ who will utterly destroy all His enemies when He appears in glory. Joseph and Benjamin are a double type of Christ as He will be revealed in the end time. In the history of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, his brother Benjamin is mentioned twelve times. Their union is also typical: Joseph is a type of the humiliated and glorified Christ upon whom all God's favour rests, while Benjamin is a type of the returning Lord who will reign here on earth. There are more of these double types in Scripture: Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, Joshua and Zerubbabel.

In this respect the meaning of Benjamin's name is also important (Gen. 35:18). Rachel called him Ben-Oni (meaning "son of my sorrow"), but his father called him Benjamin (meaning "son of the right hand" or "son of honour"). Israel will pass through much sorrow, through the Great Tribulation, before the appearing of the Messiah who is seated now at the right hand of God and will come with great power and glory on the clouds of heaven (Dan. 7:13-14; Matt. 26:64).

When the morning of the millennium dawns, the Lord will rise as the Sun of righteousness (2 Sam. 23:3-4; Mal. 4:1-2) and

defeat all His enemies. The faithful remnant of Israel will be blessed and will share the results of His victory. But the godless part of the people, who followed the antichrist, will be judged by Him. He will take vengeance in flaming fire and bring the apostate king of the last days to his end (2 Thess. 1:7-8; 2:8). When He descends triumphantly from heaven, He will strike the nations with the sword that goes out of His mouth (Rev. 19:11-21). Then a new day will dawn for this world. Christ will reign as the Prince of Peace.

In 1 Corinthians 15 we read that He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet, and that death is the last enemy that will be destroyed (vv. 25-26). From Revelation 20 it appears that this will take place *at the end* of His reign, following the judgment before the Great White Throne. Then Christ will deliver the Kingdom to God the Father, and this will mark the beginning of the eternal state where God is all and in all. Death and Hades will be cast into the lake of fire, so that in the new creation there will be no room for the power of death (Rev. 20:14; 21:4).

I think this is the prophetic meaning of the “morning” and the “evening” in this blessing. Benjamin’s blessing covers the entire “day” of Christ’s reign. Those who belong to Christ are united with Him as the great Victor, and they share in the blessing of His final victory over death (Benjamin shall divide the spoil).

But there is also a spiritual application to ourselves, which is valid today. In Jacob’s blessings we have seen the spiritual growth of the believer, the climax of which is the introduction of Christ Himself in all His glory (and as seen in His own). After the great turning point of verse 18 – the prayer for the intervention of God’s salvation – we have seen the power of victory (in Gad), fruitfulness (in Asher), as well as the liberty of the Christian and his ability to worship (in Naphtali). The crown of our happiness, however, is not our redemption, but the Saviour who desires to be glorified in His own. We fix our eyes on Him as the Lord of glory who is the centre and

the channel of every blessing (Joseph), and the Man at God's right hand who makes us more than conquerors even now (Benjamin).

## SUMMARY

### 3.1. The order of Jacob's sons in Genesis 49

**A**s appears from the table below, the order of their blessings is only partially identical with their order of birth:

<b>Genesis 29, 30, 35</b> ( <i>birth</i> )	<b>Genesis 49</b> ( <i>blessing</i> )
1. <i>Reuben</i> ( <i>Leah</i> )	<i>Reuben</i>
2. <i>Simeon</i> ( <i>Leah</i> )	<i>Simeon</i>
3. <i>Levi</i> ( <i>Leah</i> )	<i>Levi</i>
4. <i>Judah</i> ( <i>Leah</i> )	<i>Judah</i>
5. <i>Dan</i> ( <i>Bilhah</i> )	<i>Zebulun</i>
6. <i>Naphtali</i> ( <i>Bilhah</i> )	<i>Issachar</i>
7. <i>Gad</i> ( <i>Zilpah</i> )	<i>Dan</i>
8. <i>Asher</i> ( <i>Zilpah</i> )	<i>Gad</i>
9. <i>Issachar</i> ( <i>Leah</i> )	<i>Asher</i>
10. <i>Zebulun</i> ( <i>Leah</i> )	<i>Naphtali</i>
11. <i>Joseph</i> ( <i>Rachel</i> )	<i>Joseph</i>
12. <i>Benjamin</i> ( <i>Rachel</i> )	<i>Benjamin</i>

In blessing his sons, Jacob first addressed the sons of Leah, putting Zebulun before Issachar. Then the sons of the maids follow, of whom Naphtali is the one mentioned last. Both sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid, are given a place between the two sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid. Finally, we have Joseph and Benjamin: the two sons of Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved more than Leah and for whom he served his father-in-law Laban another seven years.



This order agrees with the rules of the birthright as they were set down by Moses later on (Deut. 21:15-17). For the son of the loved wife could not be favoured at the expense of the firstborn, who was the son of the unloved. The fact that Reuben did forfeit his birthright was entirely his own fault. He had gone up to his father's bed and committed adultery with Billah, his father's concubine and therefore he was deprived of his privileges (Gen. 35:22; 49:3-4; 1 Chr. 5:1-2).

The position linked with the birthright went to Judah, the fourth son of Leah (Simeon and Levi were passed over because of their violence against the inhabitants of Shechem). The *wealth* linked with it, however – the firstborn was entitled to a double portion of the inheritance – went to Joseph, the first son of Rachel, the loved one. Or rather it went to Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons, whom Jacob had blessed previously and more or less adopted as his own sons (Gen. 48). Thus Ephraim and Manasseh obtained a place of their own among the tribes of Israel (Deut. 33:17). So we see that both *Judah* and *Joseph* are given a prominent place in the blessings of Jacob, Judah receiving the position of a ruler and Joseph the wealth laid up for the firstborn.

It is also remarkable that – unlike Ishmael in the story of Abraham – the sons of the maids do not take a separate or inferior place here, but are blessed together with the other sons of Jacob. Of Ishmael God said that the son of the maid should by no means be an heir with the son of the free woman (Gen. 21:8-21). From this principle Paul draws the conclusion that there is a clear distinction between Jews and Christians, between people in slavery and people who are free (Gal. 4:21-31). They are *separately* blessed. But in the blessings of Jacob the distinction between Israel and the Church does not play a role. While Abraham is the "father" of both a heavenly and an earthly offspring, Jacob is more especially the progenitor of Israel after the flesh. Jacob's twelve sons give a complete picture of God's earthly people. In accordance with God's governmental ways they are blessed together, for in Scripture the number

twelve is always connected with God's rule over all His people.

Now if the order of Jacob's sons in Genesis 49 is determined neither by the order of their birth nor by the order of their mothers, what principle is used here? The answer is that *prophetic* and *spiritual* factors are taken into account as well, which render these blessings a splendid picture of the history of Israel until the last days.

### 3.2. A prophetic history of Israel and of the world

I am convinced that this chapter also gives a brief outline of man's history as a whole, because this is really centred around Israel. In the first three sons we see how natural man failed right from the beginning. Reuben was guided by his lusts, while Simeon and Levi used means of violence. These two evils, inner corruption and outward violence, have been the two principal evils ever since the fall of man. Time and again, these things can be found in both the history of mankind and that of Israel. The sin of Adam and Eve was their lust, the sin of Cain his violence, and they had to be driven out of God's presence. The judgment of the flood was caused by the subsequent corruption and violence that filled the earth.

But after the flood there was no apparent improvement. Man wanted to make a name for himself and started worshipping idols; we also hear about Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord. Then, with the calling of Abraham, God made a new start in that He separated a nation from the other nations in order that it should serve Him and belong to Him alone. However, Israel's history too, was one of sad failure, in the wilderness as well as in the Promised Land. Corruption and violence marked the last chapters of the Book of Judges and the first chapters of First Samuel. But then God brought relief through king David, whose birth is mentioned in the Book of Ruth.

This period in Israel's history is reflected in Jacob's prophe-

cy concerning Judah, the royal tribe, where nothing but praise is heard (Judah means "praise"). It was a Golden Age for Israel, when the nations around them were subdued. The words of Jacob about Shiloh (meaning "he who brings rest") probably refer in the first place to Solomon, the king of peace. But it is obvious that they reach far beyond him, as is shown by the words that the sceptre would not depart from Judah until the arrival of Shiloh, to whom the obedience of the peoples would be.

This prophecy concerning Shiloh is therefore a Messianic prophecy. Judah was to have a prominent role until the coming of Christ, though later on this was limited to the kingdom of the two tribes and reduced to an even lesser degree after the return from the Babylonian captivity. To Christ the nations have even now become obedient by the obedience of faith (Rom. 16:26). Yet we have to conclude that this prophecy extends further into the future. Our Lord was rejected and the time of universal peace and prosperity about which Jacob spoke was postponed until Christ's second coming. Then He will reign as the Prince of Peace and His dominion will be to the ends of the earth.

Then we see what happened after the prosperous times of David and Solomon and also after the rejection of the Messiah: assimilation with and subjugation to the nations, ending in complete apostasy. This is shown in type in Zebulun, Issachar and Dan. Here again, the prophecy has a twofold import, a historical one and a future one. Israel came gradually under the influence of the surrounding nations, which resulted in their subjugation to these nations (e.g., Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia) and in serving the idols.

Here we find Zebulun in connection with "the sea of peoples and nations" (cf. Isa. 17:12-13; Rev. 17:15). Zebulun (meaning "dwelling") was fully orientated towards the nations and to Sidon especially, from which the worship of Baal originated which was brought to Israel by king Ahab (1 Ki. 16:31-33). Issachar (meaning "hire" or "wages") then submitted to forced

labour and became a slave. In Dan (meaning “judge”) the power of the serpent (that is, Satan) was fully embodied, so that Israel was brought down and rendered powerless. Scripture often connects the tribe of Dan with idolatry (Judg. 18; 1 Ki. 12:29-30). Israel left the one true God and finally rejected the Messiah when He came to them in the form of a Servant. This marked the end of the history of Israel and of the first man in his responsibility. It had become one great fiasco and only the salvation of the LORD could bring relief (v. 18). This salvation was manifested (and seen by faith) in the cross and in the resurrection of Christ.

Then there is also a future aspect in verse 18 regarding the salvation and restoration of Israel. Jacob’s short prayer is the turning point of this chapter. After Christ’s rejection, the above process of decline and apostasy repeated itself. Israel was dispersed among the nations, having become more and more dependent on them, and this has been their situation until today. Now we come to the future application of these verses. Dan is a type of the antichrist who will reign over (“judge”) Israel with the support of the head of the revived Roman empire and of Satan himself (Rev. 13). Idolatry will then reach an all-time high and the faithful remnant of Israel will wait anxiously for the intervention of God’s salvation.

At that point God will bring about a change in the lot of His people. In answer to the prayer of verse 18 He will reveal His salvation. Dan marks the absolute low point and from there on Israel’s history takes a turn for the better. Gad, Asher and Naphtali show the results of God’s salvation in the end time. Gad (meaning “troop”) is still being endangered by hostile troops, but in the end he is victorious and drives the enemy out of the land (cf. Mic. 4:14-5:8). Asher (meaning “happy”) enjoys an abundance of food and shares it with others. Naphtali (meaning “my wrestling”) rejoices in the freedom of the victor and sings the song of salvation.

Finally, Joseph and Benjamin give a twofold picture of the glory of Christ in the millennium. Joseph (meaning “He will

add”) is a special type of the Messiah who was rejected by His brothers; but exalted by God to sit at His right hand, thereby becoming the Saviour of the world. The Father is pleased with Him and He receives the richest blessings. Benjamin (meaning “son of the right hand”) is more typical of the earthly aspect of Christ’s reign. At His appearing and the dawn of the Kingdom, Christ will destroy all His enemies. He must reign until the last enemy, namely death, has been abolished at the end of the Kingdom (1 Cor. 15:24), “in the evening” (Gen. 49:27 NASB), and the millennium will give place to the eternal state.

To sum up, the first three sons of Jacob show us natural man’s corruption. Reuben (meaning “see, a son”) behaved as an unworthy son, and Simeon (meaning “heard”) and Levi (meaning “attached”) were brothers in evil. Three sons are special types of Christ and show us how He intervenes: first Judah and finally Joseph and Benjamin. The meanings of their names and of the others have been given already. The third group of three – Zebulun, Issachar and Dan – marks the downward line of Israel’s decline and ultimate apostasy (and also the apostasy of the last days). In the last group of three – Gad, Asher and Naphtali – we have an upward line again, and we learn how Israel will be restored and will see the salvation of the Lord. Genesis 49 is a prophetic history, of which several parts have already been fulfilled in the course of Israel’s existence, while other parts with an added prophetic value are still awaiting their fulfilment in the end time.

### 3.3. A history of the Church

I am convinced that this chapter also contains important teaching regarding the history of the Church, for the whole of the Old Testament was written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4). Because of the rejection of Messiah, Israel was temporarily put aside and God now has the Christian testimony here on earth. It has failed as much as God’s ancient people.

The first four sons of Jacob show the characteristic blessings which God had bestowed originally upon His people:

- The blessing of sonship (Reuben);
- The blessing of the Spirit's guidance and of hearing God's Word (Simeon);
- The blessing of fellowship with God and with fellow-believers (Levi);
- The blessing of worshipping in spirit and truth in recognition of the authority of Christ, who sings God's praises in the midst of His brethren (Judah).

If we follow the history of Christendom we see that these privileges were soon lost sight of. Jacob's sons did not really deserve their beautiful names, and likewise, the life of the Church often contradicted its high calling. Christians have mingled with the world at the price of subjection to the world, as is seen in Zebulun (meaning "dwelling") and Issachar (meaning "hire" or "wages"). Therefore Christ reproached the church in Pergamos with the words: "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is" (Rev. 2:13).

In defiance of its heavenly calling, the Church has become an important outward power here on earth, and therefore the world and "the woman Jezebel" (i.e. popery) have ruled over it. In Revelation 2 this also culminates in idolatry, which in Genesis 49 is seen in the tribe of Dan. Jezebel's influence is found again in the end time in idolatrous Babylon the great (Rev. 17 and 18). Here nominal Christendom shows itself to be heading for judgment.

In this situation only God can show a way out. Therefore the prayer of those who remain faithful to the Word and the Name of Christ is, "I have waited for Your salvation, O LORD!" Even in the darkest hours there is a victorious remnant (God overcomes his enemies). They rejoice in abundant spiritual food (bread from Asher shall be rich) and have struggled out of the grasp of worldly and Judaistic influences (Naphtali is a deer let loose). They will share the glory of Christ who is the

Firstborn among many brethren (Joseph is the one who was separate from his brothers, or the one distinguished among his brothers). They will also reign with Him here on earth and sit with Him on His throne (Benjamin shall divide the spoil). Thus the blessings which have been lost sight of in the beginning become the portion of a faithful remnant that is waiting for the full revelation of God's salvation in the second coming of Christ.

### 3.4. Stages of spiritual growth

Apart from this, Genesis 49 contains valuable lessons for ourselves as individual believers. Our history as children and sons of God is not always flawless, as is shown in type in the first three sons of Jacob. The first lesson we learn is that "the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:46). In spite of all the privileges granted to us, our old self can be a great hindrance. Although we do recognize Christ's authority in our lives (Judah and Shiloh), we can be enslaved by the world, the law and sin (Zebulun, Issachar and Dan). Our need then leads to the prayer for the intervention of God's salvation: "I have waited for Your salvation" (v. 18). We learn from experience that we cannot expect anything good from ourselves and that only God can bring relief.

The New Testament counterpart of this short prayer of Jacob is the exclamation in Romans 7:24 – "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" But the darkest hour is just before dawn. And just as the prophecy of Jacob takes a turn for the better from this critical point, the believer is blessed once his eyes have been opened to the fullness of salvation in Christ and to the fact that he has been set free from the law of sin and death.

So he learns to thank God, for he changes from a slave into a free man, and from a loser into a victor. Romans 8 depicts the Christian's victorious life in the power of the Spirit of God.

Now this is exactly what we find in the next three sons of Jacob. Gad overcomes the enemies besieging him. Asher shows the abundant life which is the victor's portion. His bread is rich and he yields royal dainties: he is able to let others share in his abundance. The picture is completed by Naphtali, who depicts the freedom and the joy of the believer after the struggle of Romans 7. He is a deer let loose and gives beautiful words. He sings the song of praise of Christian liberty and cries, "Abba, Father!"

This process of spiritual growth finally reaches its height in that Christ Himself is seen in the believer. Living by the Spirit conforms us to the image of God's Son (cf. Rom. 8:14, 29). This is shown in type by the last two sons of Jacob, Joseph and Benjamin, beautiful types of the Lord Jesus. Christ Himself is the climax of our blessing, the crown of our happiness. In Joseph we see Him both in His rejection and in His exaltation, and our lives should be in agreement with this. On the one hand Christ in His utter humiliation is our model (Phil. 2); on the other hand Christ in His heavenly glory is the goal of all our ambitions (Phil. 3). If He is formed in us in this way, our life will be more and more under the Lordship of the Man at God's right hand, who allows us to partake in the results of His victory (Benjamin shall divide the spoil). Thus we reach spiritual maturity – which is so often mentioned in the New Testament – and the image of Christ is clearly seen in us (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-3; Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:12-16; Col. 1:28).



## COMPARISON WITH MOSES' BLESSING

Jacob's blessing has a remarkable counterpart in Moses' blessing at the end of the Pentateuch (Deut. 33). The main difference is that Genesis 49 stresses man's responsibility, whereas Deuteronomy 33 emphasizes God's plans and purposes. Genesis 49 is, in fact, one long history of guilt and punishment, of failure and restoration. But Deuteronomy 33 is a picture of the people at the time when they, according to the counsels of God's grace, have been given possession of all the blessings of the Promised Land. In this chapter the Spirit of God passes over all the negative things which Jacob said about his sons in Genesis 49.

Of course, there is also a difference in the way they are addressed. Jacob regarded his sons as the heads and the representatives of the twelve tribes (Gen. 49:28), while Moses spoke to the tribes themselves.

The order of Jacob's sons in Deuteronomy 33 is different from the one in Genesis 49. Reuben is immediately followed by Judah, who received Reuben's position as the firstborn. Simeon is missing completely, probably because this tribe merged with Judah. However, there are still twelve names listed because Ephraim and Manasseh are mentioned separately in the blessing of Joseph.

Now let us compare the order in both chapters:

**Genesis 49**

1. *Reuben*
2. *Simeon*
3. *Levi*
4. *Judah*
5. *Zebulun*
6. *Issachar*
7. *Dan*
8. *Gad*
9. *Asher*
10. *Naphtali*
11. *Joseph*
12. *Benjamin*

**Deuteronomy 33**

- Reuben*  
*Judah*  
*Levi*  
*Benjamin*  
*Joseph (Ephraim + Manasseh)*  
*Zebulun*  
*Issachar*  
*Gad*  
*Dan*  
*Naphtali*  
*Asher*

Judah is followed by Levi, who carries off a rich blessing as a reward for his obedience to the Lord after Israel had sinned by worshipping the golden calf (Ex. 32:25-29). Along with Joseph he takes the most prominent place in Moses' blessing, whereas in Genesis 49 this place is occupied by Judah and Joseph! The Book of Deuteronomy shows the people in possession of the land, brought close to God and living according to His commandments – for which Levitical service is necessary.

After this the two sons of Rachel follow: first Benjamin, then Joseph, an order determined by spiritual reasons. Whereas Levi had the *service* of the sanctuary, Benjamin had the *location* of the sanctuary. Jerusalem was part of Benjamin's territory and therefore it says here (v. 12) that he would dwell in safety close by the Lord and that the Lord would dwell between his shoulders (i.e., mountainsides). This leads to the full blessing granted to Joseph, who again is called "the one who was separate from his brothers" (cf. Gen. 49:26). Others render this as "the prince" or "the one distinguished" among his brothers. Only then follow the two last sons of Leah and the four sons of the maids. Their blessings all relate to the possession and enjoyment of the inheritance in the Promised Land.

Moses spoke these things on the eve of the entry into Canaan under Joshua's leadership. But apart from the historical fulfilment of a number of these blessings there is, similarly as in Genesis 49, an obvious prophetic and spiritual value. Deuteronomy 33 contains several references to the coming Kingdom, in which Israel will possess the land not just temporarily but for ever.

It is remarkable that in verse 7 Judah is said to be brought to his people (from the Diaspora). Levi will overcome his adversaries (v. 11) – in the end time there will be plenty of them – and Benjamin will dwell in safety in the land. Joseph will even rule over the nations and expand his dominion to the ends of the earth (v. 17). Zebulun and Issachar will call the peoples to the mountain (v. 19), that is, the mountain of the Lord, the Temple mount which in the last days will be established "as the chief of the mountains" (Isa. 2:2-5 NASB).

The last reference to the millennium is found in the final verse of Moses' blessing, where it says that Israel's enemies shall submit to them or cringe before them. They will pretend submission to the people of God. This expression also occurs in the Psalms and points to the subjugation of the nations during the reign of Christ (Ps. 18, 66, 81).

## EPILOGUE

There can also be no doubt about the practical and spiritual meaning of these blessings for ourselves. It is also true for us that it is the blessing of the Lord that makes rich (Prov. 10:22). And our riches are of a spiritual nature in the first place, since we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 1:3). In the same way as Israel received the Promised Land (the possession of which is really the subject of Moses' blessings), so a vast territory of spiritual and heavenly blessings has been granted to us to be taken possession of by faith.

The subject here is not then, as in Genesis 49, the stages of spiritual growth, or the history of the failure and restoration of God's people as a whole. In Deuteronomy 33 the subject is the unhindered possession of God's blessings in the "land" that He has given us. Although these blessings are our individual portion, it is more the collective side of it which is shown here. They are enjoyed in "tribal relationships", in the "family" in which we are born and live together: the family of God's children. See in connection with this John's writings and also Psalm 133, where we read about the blessing that God commands where brothers dwell together in unity.

We will not study Moses' blessings in detail now, but I would like to point to the fact that they end with praise towards the God of Israel who rode the heavens to their help – whereas Jacob halfway his speech utters a plea for the revelation of the Lord's salvation.



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